

# Introduction

It must have been an awe-inspiring sight, a truly lovely and captivating scene: On solemn feast days the ladies of Mount St. Rupert, all of noble lineage, gathered in procession and made their way slowly to the choir, walking in splendor, clad all in white, with silk veils so long they reached to their feet and lightly touched the floor. With the grace natural to their highborn estate, they walked, with unbound, free-flowing hair, and with elegant gold rings on their fingers. They sang as they walked, their melodious voices pouring forth psalms and hymns of praise to the Divine, and on their heads they wore crowns of gold filigree that at once affirmed and belied their earthly nobility, for, emphasizing spiritual other-ness, these resplendent circlets bore figures of the cross on the sides and back, and, on the front, the confirming image of the *Agnus Dei*. And all was graceful beauty, loveliness and melody, and unstinting praise, like a vision of paradise—a ceremony fit for the King, the outer splendor deliberately calculated to reflect the inward spirituality.

And yet, to some, it was a distasteful, even irreligious, ceremony, for we learn of the extraordinary activity of this extraordinary monastery under the governance of Hildegard of Bingen only from a hostile source (see Letter 52). These charges against her—of accepting only nobility into her community, of indulging feminine vanity—Hildegard answered, in part, by what must surely be the highest paean of praise to womankind to come down to us from the Middle Ages: “O woman, what a splendid being you are! For you have set your foundation in the sun, and you have conquered the world” (Letter 52r).

Although Hildegard continues her defense by asserting that the strictures against feminine decoration do not apply to virgins, who stand “in the unsullied purity of paradise,” she does not, as might have been expected, elaborate the

argument by recourse to the medieval commonplace of the monastery as the *hortus conclusus*, “the enclosed garden,” the earthly paradise wherein the tranquillity and beauty of the supernal could, in part, be recaptured. Yet such an image, such a complex of ideas, must, surely, have been latent in her thought as she worked out the myriad details of this uncommon ceremony. Indeed, in another letter (23), she makes an argument of just that kind for the power and efficacy of music. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the prophets, she asserts,

were called for this purpose: not only to compose psalms and canticles (by which the hearts of listeners would be inflamed) but also to construct various kinds of musical instruments to enhance these songs of praise with melodic strains. Thereby, both through the form and quality of the instruments, as well as through the meaning of the words which accompany them, those who hear might be taught about inward things, since they have been admonished and aroused by outward things. In such a way, these holy prophets get beyond the music of this exile and recall to mind that divine melody of praise which Adam, in company with the angels, enjoyed in God before his fall.

It is fortunate that so large a collection of the correspondence—nearly 400 of Hildegard’s own letters—has been preserved, for these epistles enlarge our view of Hildegard far beyond that of the near-unapproachable seer of the *Scivias* and the other visionary works. In these letters, instead, we find the practical abbess, as above, concerning herself with the pragmatic details of religious ceremony, a ritual modeled, to be sure, on her ethereal visions of the celestial virtues but worked out nonetheless on an earthly plane. In this instance, too, it is significant that we are privileged to see her through the eyes—the unawed eyes at that—of a contemporary. Or we find her, as in the other letter referred to above, working toward a still inchoate philosophy of music, a theory that, one has the sense, might well have been worked out in far more systematic detail in another visionary work if she had lived a few years longer.

None of this is to say, of course, that the seer is not present in the letters. Far from it. Here, too, as elsewhere, there is a continual oscillation between the almost abject humility of the “poor little form of a woman” and the commanding authority of the voice of the Living Light, so much so indeed that they often merge so completely that it is difficult to determine who is Who. Still, there is something far more personal here: the near hysteria of the woman who has recourse to the authority of the Living Light in a desperate—and futile—attempt to hold on to the beloved nun who has been taken from her; the sorrowful resignation, without recriminations, upon receiving word of the untimely death of that nun; the deep sorrow on the loss of music to her community through the edicts of excommunication; the care taken to respond to even the most trivial of requests from those who sought her out as the very oracle of God; the continuing devoted memory to those who cared for her, taught her, and loved her as a child; the stubborn refusal to compromise her principles, even in advanced old age, despite the threat and, eventually, the fact of interdict; the sheer audacity of the woman, who felt herself buoyed by the

wings of the Divine, and called forth the strength to speak out to a weak, effeminate age; et cetera.

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098 in Bermersheim, a small town not far from Mainz, the tenth child of a local nobleman named Hildebert and his wife Mechthild. From earliest childhood she gave indications of unusual faculties, seeing, as she herself affirms, brilliant lights and strange visions. In her childish naivete, she thought that everybody “saw” as she did, and so she queried her nurse, but, receiving a negative, was abashed and resolved to keep her peace. It was as early as the age of three—or five, according to the prefatory remarks in the *Scivias*—that she began experiencing such paranormal phenomena when she saw a light so bright that *anima mea contremuit*, “my very soul shook.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps because she was such an unusual, other-worldly, child, or perhaps simply because, as the tenth child of her parents, she was offered up as a spiritual tithe, at the age of eight she was presented as an oblate to God. At this time she entered a small cell attached to the Benedictine monastery of Mount St. Disibod, where she was entrusted to the care of the anchoress Jutta of Sponheim. Here she was to stay—in relative obscurity—for some thirty years. The early years she spent alone with Jutta, but the little cell of two grew as, over the years, more and more noble, young girls placed themselves under Jutta’s governance, and upon Jutta’s death in 1136 Hildegard herself was elected to her position as head of the community.

From Jutta, Hildegard received a rudimentary education, or, as the *Vita* (I.i.2) puts it, she was taught the Psalter, that is, presumably, she was taught to read Latin. Beyond this early nurturing, the most significant service that Jutta performed was to put Hildegard in contact with the monk Volmar, who not only continued, and broadened, her education, but once she began her own writing career, served as her secretary, confidant, and friend for the rest of his life (and much of hers) until his death in 1173. It was Volmar who encouraged her to begin her first major work, the *Scivias*, exhorting her to put those things in writing “secretly,” until he could determine what they were and from whence they came. And it was Volmar, who, once convinced of the divine inspiration, brought her writing to the attention of Kuno, abbot of St. Disibod. Kuno brought the matter to the attention of Heinrich, archbishop of Mainz; and Heinrich, to Pope Eugenius, who just happened to be presiding over the Synod of Trier in 1147–48, and from that happy coincidence the career—and fame—of Hildegard took wing. The pope himself read Hildegard’s work to the assembled prelates. They were all duly impressed, and impelled by their urging (along with the specific support of Bernard of Clairvaux), Eugenius gave his sanction to her work, and commanded her to continue writing. The correspondence itself began in that same eventful year of 1147, when, only a short time before the reading in Trier, Hildegard wrote to Bernard seeking his advice and approval.

At this point Hildegard is forty-nine years old! She had received the call to put her visions into writing only some six years earlier, in 1141. Thus it is startling to realize, on reviewing the facts of her history, that she did not begin

her lifework—at least her public lifework—until she was forty-three, and this despite the fact that she had been receiving visions from infancy. That long delay was doubtless the result of the accident of gender.<sup>2</sup> What one can say, most certainly, is that from the age of forty-three forward, until her death at eighty-one (even old age seeming powerless to slow her down), Hildegard—to use an image dear to her heart—tilled the Lord’s garden with great diligence. She produced six major written works, she founded two flourishing monasteries, she wrote music, she gave birth to the earliest full-fledged morality play, she became the correspondent—and advisor—of popes, kings, emperor. It was a full life indeed.

The extent of Hildegard’s education is a problem not likely ever to be solved. We know that Jutta supplied rudimentary instruction, and that Volmar built on that foundation. Beyond that, not very much. We know that her grasp of Latin syntax and structure is somewhat less than certain, and we know that she herself always claims, insists (and others insist for her), that she is *indocta*, “unlearned” and untaught. Concerning this matter, the author of the *Vita* (II.i.14) writes:

It is a great and wondrous matter that she wrote with her own hand,<sup>3</sup> and uttered aloud with a pure, unsullied mind those things which she heard and saw in her spirit, using the same sense and the same words. She was content to rely on only one faithful man as her collaborator, who undertook to arrange the cases, tenses, and genders grammatically (since she herself was unschooled in grammar). He did not, however, take it upon himself to add or subtract anything whatsoever from the sense or meaning.

And Hildegard is even more determined to deny any mere earthly learning. She acknowledges her celestial knowledge, of course, is confident—even defiant—in her possession of it, but that knowledge came, as it were, despite her ignorance, or perhaps not *despite* but *because* of it:

I saw a great splendor in which resounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me, “O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth! Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not by human mouth, and not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God. . . .” And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures, namely, the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic volumes of both the Old and the New Testaments, though I did not have the interpretation of the words of their texts or the division of the syllables or the knowledge of cases or tenses.<sup>4</sup>

A part of this attitude is owing, of course, to pure convention, to the omnipresent humility formula, but in this case it seems to be that *and much more*. The more the *paupercula* “the poor little form of a woman” stresses her wretchedness, her humility, her ignorance of earthly learning, the more credence is given to her otherworldly illumination. How could one lacking the very basic instruments of grammar speak with such authority, such great con-

fidence, unless inspired by the Divine? In this respect it is interesting to note Volmar's response on first learning of Hildegard's visions: he sought to discover what these visions were and whence they had come. For him, there was no question of the inspiration, only a matter of the direction from which that inspiration had come.

In any case, whatever weight we might feel compelled to give to her protestations of ignorance, it is certainly true that her learning and ability far exceed that of the acquisition of the mere rudiments of Latin, however shaky her grammar may be at times. On occasion she soars to real grandeur and eloquence, as in her learned disquisition on the wondrous properties of music (Letter 23), or in her majestic trumpeting forth of her own divine mission (*Scivias* "Protestificatio"), or in her use of humble, homey images to express a divine purpose (like, for instance, her vision of herself as a helpless feather conveyed by the wind of the Holy Spirit, used again and again in the letters and elsewhere), or in her (calculated?) shift between the extreme humility of the wretched woman and the thundering, commanding voice of the Living Light (used throughout). Moreover, she was far more widely read than her protestations would lead one to believe. Peter Dronke has argued for her acquaintance not only with the Scriptures but also with the writings of the Church Fathers (perhaps even including Origen), as well as with Classical texts such as Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and Seneca's *Quaestiones Naturales*.<sup>5</sup>

One of the greatest challenges in reading (and translating) Hildegard indeed comes not from her own difficulty with the scholarly language, but, as it were, from her very ease with it, her fecund and canny use of its creative possibilities. Perhaps the most notable example of this is her use of *viriditas*, a word never far from Hildegard's reach. This *viriditas*, this despair of translators, this "greenness" enters into the very fabric of the universe in Hildegard's cosmic scheme of things. In Hildegard's usage it is a profound, immense, dynamically energized term. The world in the height of the spring season is filled with *viriditas*, God breathed the breath of *viriditas* into the inhabitants of the garden of Eden, even the smallest twig on the most insignificant tree is animated with *viriditas*, the sun brings the life of *viriditas* into the world; and (in the spiritual realm) the prelate who is filled with *taedium* (weariness) is lacking in *viriditas*, the garden where the virtues grow is imbued with *viriditas*, the neophyte must strive for *viriditas*, and the holy Virgin is the *viridissima virga*. Hildegard can even speak with aplomb of a saint as the *viriditas digiti Dei*, "the *viriditas* of the finger of God," as she does of St. Disibod (Letter 74r).

For *viriditas* to flourish—in the natural world, in the spiritual realm—there must be moisture (*humor*, *humiditas*), another concept Hildegard has taken over and made wholly her own. Even the very stones have *humor* (Letter 31r), and if earth did not have *humiditatem et viriditatem*, it would crumble like ashes. "For I"—so speaks the mystic voice through Hildegard—"formed rocks from fire and water like bones, and I established earth from *humiditate et viriditate* like marrow" (Letter 15r). And this, too, is spiritual, since *humiditas* and *viriditas* are, as manifestations of God's power, qualities of the human soul, for

“the grace of God shines like the sun and sends its gifts in various ways: in wisdom (*sapientia*), in viridity (*viriditate*), in moisture (*humiditate*)” (Letter 85r/b). It is for such reasons that Hildegard continuously advises her correspondents to be on guard lest their virtues become as dry as the dust: “Watch carefully lest your God-given viridity dry up (*arescat*) because of the instability of your thought” (Letter 85r/a); or ends a letter with the devout reflection, “May your eye live in God, and may the viridity of your soul never dry up (*arescat*)” (Letter 20r). Thought of this sort leads naturally to the garden imagery in which Hildegard’s works, including the letters, abound.

And this leads to an understanding of Hildegard’s enigmatic *pigmentarius* as a designation for bishops or priests,<sup>6</sup> a usage that has never been satisfactorily explained. This word, which in its basic sense means “a dealer in paints or perfumes,” still carries, for Hildegard, an aura of color and fragrance, for it has to do with gardens, and, as might be expected, gardens both physical and spiritual. A *pigmentarius* is apparently one who, by his industry, works to enhance the lovely colors and delightful odors of his flower or herb garden. In Letter 84r, for example, Hildegard exhorts a prior to rouse the members of his order “out of their ignorance, just as a good *pigmentarius* eradicates rank weeds from his garden.” Thus the administrator or prelate, in Hildegard’s special language, becomes the gardener, whose spiritual responsibility it is to dutifully tend his garden. It is for this reason that Hildegard uses the phrase *vivens odor* as a designation for “monk.” None of this is, of course, mere frivolous quibbling or light word play. It is grounded firmly in *viriditas* and *humor/humiditas* and the thorough merging of the physical/spiritual so characteristic of Hildegard’s thought.

That these ideas are habitual with Hildegard from her earliest writing can be seen in the peroration of her letter to St. Bernard, the opening missive of her correspondence, where one can also see something of the eloquence that she is sometimes capable of in her exalted mode:

*Oro te per serenitatem Patris, et per eius Verbum admirabile, et per suavem humorem compunctionis, Spiritum veritatis, et per sanctum sonitum, per quem sonat omnis creatura, et per ipsum Verbum, de quo ortus est mundus, et per altitudinem Patris, qui in suavi viriditate misit Verbum in Virginis uterum, unde suxit carnem sicut circumdificatur mel fauo.*

And so I beseech your aid, through the serenity of the Father and through His wondrous Word and through the sweet moisture of compunction, the spirit of truth, and through that holy sound, which all creation echoes, and through that same Word which gave birth to the world, and through the sublimity of the Father, who sent the Word with sweet fruitfulness into the womb of the Virgin, from which He soaked up flesh, just as honey is surrounded by the honeycomb.

This present work is, of course, a collection of letters, but once that fact is acknowledged, qualifications are immediately in order. If, for example, readers bring to these letters the usual modern expectations of intimacy, self-revelation, relative brevity, or even notions of single-person-to-single-person

communication, they are likely to be disappointed if not utterly mystified. Perhaps the most important factor to bear in mind with respect to medieval letter collections indeed is the general public-ness of the form, for the medieval letter was a far more public document than our modern predilections lead us to expect. Rarely, if ever, was an individual letter intended for a single recipient alone.<sup>7</sup> Modes of production (secretaries, copyists, etc.), modes of transmission (carriers, messengers), even modes of composition (copybooks containing model letters) made real privacy unlikely at best; and the mode, inevitably, helped to shape and mold the form. As a result, even in those instances where a letter addresses individual problems, it still tends to be cast in generalized, public form, laboriously working through its set formulas, agonizingly slow (from a modern perspective) to get to the main point at issue. And—though this is less the case with Hildegard’s own letters than with letters addressed to her—those formulas tended to be very rigorous and complex, as prescribed by the popular *artes dictaminis*. This accounts for the elaborate salutations, for which there were very precise rules with respect to class, status, et cetera, as well as for the ostentatious (and, to modern ears, fulsome) praise directed to the intended recipient.<sup>8</sup> Yet perhaps the best evidence to confirm the public nature of the epistolary process lies in those instances where the letter that has come down to us consists wholly of formulas without any real substance at all. For sometimes the message was so private—or perhaps so dangerous—that to commit it to writing was, to say the least, impolitic. In such cases, the *nuncius* or carrier himself delivered the message orally, the “letter” serving simply as an introduction or as a token of respect and friendship to the recipient.<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Letters 11 and 45, where the point of the correspondence remains vaguely, maddeningly obscure.

The public nature of letters could also have disquieting consequences for what we like to think of as authenticity. The texts of letters, more perhaps than with other types of writing, were subject to various kinds of tampering, by recipient as well as original writer after the letter had been sent out. “The text of a letter,” as Constable remarks (51),

was liable to revision at any stage in its history from the original dictation up to its incorporation into the final collection or other form where it could rest secure from the hands of would-be improvers. These included not only the author but also scribes, secretaries, and even the recipients of letters, who were considered to own the texts of letters sent to them . . . and were sometimes asked by the author to make changes in the text.

The correspondence between Hildegard and Tengswich of Andernach (Letters 53, 53r), for example, was subjected to substantial revision, the form in the later collection of the letters being an edited, “cleaned up” version of that in the earlier one.<sup>10</sup> Yet perhaps the greatest temptation for a copier or secretary was the addition of interesting, related, but non-authorial material to the text of a letter, or of merging two or even three different letters and presenting them as a single whole. A brief comparison of the *Patrologia* edition of the letters with Van Acker’s will indicate how frequently the challenge of such

temptations was taken up. Also, see Letter 15r in this collection, with its two long appendages of doubtfully authentic material, printed by Van Acker as appendices to the letter. This is, of course, a matter more pertinent to an edition than to a translation, but the reader ought to be aware of the problem.

A final factor that should be noted with respect to the medieval letter-form is the wide range of subject matter that was considered appropriate to the genre. Sometimes a letter, in its brevity and singularity of purpose, is little different from what we might expect from a modern writer, as, for example, Letter 68 in this collection, where Abbot Gedolphus of Brauweiler writes a simple request for help for a woman possessed of the devil—though even here it should be noted how delayed the request is by the necessities of form, a full paragraph of praise for the recipient of the letter. Yet this is scarcely the norm, for the medieval letter, and the letters collected here in particular, vary widely with respect to length, subject matter, and general mode of presentation. As Constable remarks (p. 14), “This concept of the letter as *sermo absentium* [word of the absent] opened the way to including within the epistolary genre many works—especially works like sermons and polemical treatises, in which the writer sought to appeal directly to the reader—that would not today commonly be written in the form of a letter.” Thus the epistolary genre, with its openness of form, would appear to be the perfect medium for this twelfth-century seer, who had a great deal to say to the people of her time in all stations of life, and much of what she said was admonitory, edifying, and instructional. Herein, therefore, are to be found sermons and treatises, some of quite extensive length, and reports of visions and even a kind of prescribed exorcism ritual, as well as varied other subject matter. What one does not find here, at least not to speak of, is any kind of emotional self-revelation, even, for example, in those letters that deal with what we know was a great personal loss to Hildegard, the departure of her favorite nun, Richardis. This is the twelfth, not the nineteenth century.

Some knowledge of the political and religious climate of the time is also important for an understanding of the letters. The age into which Hildegard was born was a turbulent, disorderly age, a time of petty wars and fierce struggles, of unruly secular leaders and undisciplined Church officials, a time of popes and anti-popes, emperors and anti-emperors, a time, in short, of bloody conflict between Church and State. Henry IV, quixotic in disposition and thoroughly unprincipled in character, was king of Germany and putative ruler of the empire. This “worshipper of Baal,” as Hildegard was later to call him, opposed the authority of the Church on all fronts, and, when he could not achieve his will through legitimate means, created his own anti-pope (Clement III), by whom he was crowned emperor some fourteen years before Hildegard’s birth, in 1084. The history of Henry’s reign is one of almost constant conflict and bloodshed, the balance of power shifting erratically back and forth between Empire and Church. When Henry sought a means to his coronation, he did not lack for bishops, and even cardinals, who were all too ready to fulfill his will by excommunicating and deposing the currently sitting pope. It was indeed against just this evil—a priesthood that owed its allegiance not to the mitre



but to the crown—that the supreme office of the Church had rallied all its awesome powers in stubborn opposition.

By the late eleventh century, the Church had become thoroughly secularized. Church offices, from archbishoprics on down, were being bought and sold with impunity, real plums carrying with them massive power and influence going to the highest bidder without the slightest nod to the spiritual qualifications of the would-be incumbent. Specific examples of egregious abuses would be easy enough to cite (such as the case of one Godfrey, an ignorant and vicious man, who bought the archbishopric of Trier for a rumored 1,100 marks of silver), but the real problem lay in how commonplace the practice was, how generally accepted as the norm. Secular princes sold bishoprics and abbacies, and the dependent offices of these were sold in turn by the new, simoniacal incumbents. Simony,<sup>11</sup> with all its attendant grievances, had thoroughly infected the Church at all levels, from which scarcely any office, including the papal throne, was exempt. Compounding this problem of pure simony was the matter of lay investiture. With roots stretching as far back as the ninth century, lay investiture—the power by which a secular prince invested his own dependent with the full powers of a spiritual office without intervention by the Church—grew up slowly but, it must be acknowledged, quite naturally, for the temporalities attending such offices—lands and wealth—created, in effect, great feudal barons, little different from their secular counterparts; and, in time, kings had come to look upon these spiritual “barons” in much the same way as they did their own secular nobility. And little wonder, for these spiritual leaders reveled in worldly ambitions: they commanded immense power and influence, they were lords over vast estates, they led their own armies, they had wives and concubines.

Such was the state of things when Gregory VII became pope in 1073. And it was against such evils that Gregory, the great reforming pope, began directing all his energies. The principal target of Gregorian reform was the so-called triple threat to Christianity: clerical marriage, simony, and lay investiture. Of these three, the latter became the symbolic focus of the struggle between Church and Empire, a struggle which was destined to continue far beyond Gregory’s lifetime. It was not until 1122, with the Concordat of Worms, nearly half a century after Gregory launched his campaign, that the investiture struggle was finally resolved. Still, the settlement was a compromise at best. The emperor retained the right to oversee elections and to invest the spiritual offices with the temporalities, and thus the power to overawe and to command the loyalties of the incumbents.

The struggles between the Empire and Church continued throughout Hildegard’s lifetime. Most of her active life was spent under the reign of Frederick I, Barbarossa (1152–90), and, like Hildegard’s own *bête noir* Henry IV, Barbarossa also created anti-popes—three successive ones: Victor IV, Paschal III, and Calixtus III—in his continual efforts to achieve his imperial aims. And unless it be thought that these were mere ideological struggles, the harsh, physical reality of the conflict must be stressed: these were cruel, bloody, slaughter-filled times.<sup>12</sup> Hildegard corresponded with prelates on both sides of

the issue, as she did, for example, with Conrad, for a short time archbishop of Mainz, and Christian de Buch, usurper of that see. When Frederick held the Diet of Würzburg in order to secure recognition of his anti-pope Paschal III, Conrad fled the assembly in order to attach himself to the canonically elected Alexander III. Frederick immediately replaced him as archbishop with Christian de Buch, whom he soon afterward despatched into Italy with his anti-pope with orders to reduce the Italian cities and take over Rome. Christian, a ferocious but very able general, ensconced Paschal in Viterbo, ravaged the countryside around Rome, and would have fulfilled his command to the letter save for the timely arrival of a rescuing Sicilian army. Needless to say, these were trying, uncertain, and fearsome times for the German prelates. Some, like Christian de Buch, attached themselves fiercely to the imperial cause; some, like Conrad, held with the pope; others were forced to choose, willy-nilly, between the two according to their conscience—or their circumstances. It is little wonder that some of Hildegard's correspondents express the need for caution in their letters.

Given these facts, the question naturally arises about Hildegard's own attitude toward the empire and toward Barbarossa in particular. The answer to that question is far fuzzier and more ambiguous than might be hoped. When Frederick was first elected king of Germany, Hildegard wrote him a letter of congratulations and, as one would expect of Hildegard, of advice. We know, too, that she once visited him, some time probably in the mid-1150s, in the royal palace at Ingelheim, for Frederick writes to inform her that the predictions she made to him on that occasion had all come true. And despite the schism which began with the disputed papal election in 1159, a rupture that lasted for eighteen years, and despite the fact that he was excommunicated by Alexander III in 1160, Hildegard seems to have managed to maintain some kind of relationship with him. In 1163, for example—that is, after his excommunication—she accepted Frederick's charter of protection for Mount St. Rupert. And we know that she numbered among her friends many of the German prelates who favored the emperor, one of whom was the powerful Philip of Heinsberg, quondam imperial chancellor, who was a frequent visitor at Mount St. Rupert, and who, late in her life, came loyally to Hildegard's defense when her community had been placed under interdict over the disputed burial of a man within the monastery grounds. On the other hand, when, after the death of the anti-pope Victor IV, Frederick attempted to impose his new choice upon the Church, Hildegard took him to task in no uncertain terms, calling him a "madman" and an "infant." And we know that Hildegard came from an aristocratic background and that she continued to have aristocratic leanings.<sup>13</sup> But that is all we know, and we might well have expected more from the fearless seer on the upper Rhine.

In any case, it is this age—from the late eleventh century up to her own time (she is quite specific)—that Hildegard calls the "womanish time," not, of course, because "manly" things were not being done (violence, bloodshed, wars) but because, as she says, the justice of God has become weak. The letters make fairly clear what she means by this: the prelates of the Church, the rep-

representatives of God's justice on earth, have grown weak and effeminate from easy living; their love of luxury and bodily pleasures has sapped their manly fortitude; their zeal for the Lord's work has become tepid and feeble; their message to the world has become sterile and, worse, perverted and distorted. Hence this present age, as she writes (26r) to Hillinus, archbishop of Trier, is a "squalid, womanish time." And, hence, God has, paradoxically, called forth a woman to bring virility back into the Church.

This weakness of God's justice, the pre-eminent sign of the *tempus muliebre*, "the womanish age," is firmly linked in Hildegard's mind with schism and heresy. She traces its beginnings, after all, to Henry IV, that great schismatic maker of anti-popes, whom Hildegard is always reluctant to name but instead labels as that iniquitous "worshipper of Baal." Her age was certainly a time rife with heresies, a time when even vicious and ignorant leaders could rise up from the masses preaching outlandish doctrines and gain a following. In fact, fear of being counted among such schismatics was, at least in part, the motivating force behind her earliest extant letter, the letter to St. Bernard seeking approval of her strange visions. Hildegard was, of course, no schismatic, and it could be argued indeed that much of her work (not just the sermons so designated) was directed against the heretical notions of her age, for, in her view, a mighty female warrior (*bellatrix*) had arisen, whom God had called forth to bring virility back into the Church, and if Hildegard was not exactly that warrior herself, she was certainly her standard-bearer (see Letter 23).

Catharism was the most powerful heresy of the age, a stream of thought that the Church seemed powerless to bring under control, and which steadily gained influence over the minds of poor and powerful alike until Innocent III's Albigensian Crusade of the early thirteenth century.<sup>14</sup> Considering its gnostic origins, it is surprising that Catharism exerted such power over the popular mind, but that fact seems to owe more to the abuses within the orthodox Church itself than to the power of the doctrine. The arrogance, sloth, and general worldliness of the prelates of the Church prepared a rich field for the seeds of heresy, as Hildegard herself makes clear in her criticism of clerics for encouraging the Cathars (Letter 15r) by their moral laxity. The Cathars themselves, by contrast, were noted for the purity of their lives.<sup>15</sup>

As a dualist heresy, Catharism was especially repugnant to Hildegard. Holding that the universe is divided between two all-powerful, warring principles, the Cathars believed that the material world—the domain, even the creation, of the Evil One—is itself evil, and must be rejected absolutely. One could scarcely conceive of a doctrine more distasteful to the seer who taught the essential goodness, the sanctity of all creation. In pointed contradiction to the basic tenet of Catharism, Hildegard writes that all created things

are the materials for the instruction of mankind, which he comprehends by touching, kissing, and embracing, since they serve him: by touching, because a man remains in them; by kissing, because he gains knowledge through them; by embracing, because he exercises his noble power through them. Thus mankind would have no freedom of possibility if they did not exist with him. So, they with mankind, and mankind with them [Letter 15r].

And whether directly addressing the Cathars or not, she soars to the heights of eloquence in expounding how the created world, the handiwork of God, declares the glory of the Lord:

But the fire has a flame which the wind quickens, so that the flame becomes a blazing fire. Thus the word is in the voice and the word is heard, and the fire has a flame and it is praise to God, and the wind moves the flame and it is praise to God, and the word is in the voice and it is praise to God, and the word is heard and it is praise to God. Therefore, all of creation is praise to God<sup>16</sup> [Letter 77r].

But let us turn more directly to technique and style in the correspondence. The distinctive quality of the letters, as of her other visionary works, is the way in which Hildegard displaces her own self from the center. Typically, a letter opens with a voucher for the verity of the message to follow, and this is true whether or not the message that follows is particularly prophetic or divine: “The Living Light has said to me”; “In the inspiration of a true vision, I saw and heard these words”; “The Fountain of Waters cries out to you”; “He Who gives life to the living says”; “The one who was, and is, and is about to come speaks”; “In a vision I saw,” et cetera. The words that follow such openings are the words of the Divine or the Living Light itself, whether quoted directly or reported indirectly from an earlier vision—though frequently mingled strangely, inextricably with Hildegard’s own words. All of this is, of course, a means of gaining authenticity for her word, the bid of “the poor feminine creature” for authority in a very masculine world.<sup>17</sup> Whatever the case, it seems certainly to be true that Hildegard is more comfortable speaking through voices other than her own. For in addition to the voice of the Living Light, the letters have quite a large cast of characters, since frequently, even here, Hildegard strikes the chords of her other, more allegorical works by vivifying abstract concepts, giving life and voice to virtues and vices, and thereby gaining objective distance, as it were, for her own distinctive message by projecting it onto her own created beings. The method, it must be confessed, is a little odd, considering the context, and, at times, a little strained.

Sometimes, she simply personalizes the abstractions as helpers to be enlisted or as distracters to be avoided, as she does in Letter 12 with an admonition to “be zealous to build the tower of celestial Jerusalem, and may God give you that sweetest mother Mercy as your assistant.” At other times, she brings them fully on stage to enact the message of God’s will teaching the proper way of life.<sup>18</sup> Hildegard uses such scenic frameworks in a variety of ways. In some letters the personified virtues directly address the recipients in monologues, with a plea to amend their lives, or to hold firm in the way of the Lord. Thus in Letter 25r to Archbishop Eberhard, Hildegard brings on two abstractions, Divine Love (*Caritas*) and Obedience (*Obedientia*), to perform a scene that includes costuming (for the two virtues are “clad in regal garments”) and dramatic action (they knock at the archbishop’s door). In a pattern found in the *Ordo Virtutum* and in *Scivias* III.xiii, Divine Love and Obedience speak their lines in succession, here addressing Eberhard directly, and although they

enter together and knock at the door at the same time, there is no interplay between them, the recitation being more important than the stage action. Also participating in this little vignette is a third virtue, Wisdom (*Sapientia*), who, after the other two abstractions have played their parts, speaks a sort of epilogue, again addressed directly to Eberhard, echoing Divine Love's speech urging the archbishop to search and cleanse wounds. Although distanced in this way from the immediate voice of the writer, this miniature drama is a strikingly effective appeal to the senses, with the virtues not only heard speaking directly to the reader, but also "seen" in their sumptuous costumes, dramatically engaged in action, drawing Eberhard into an immediate relationship with the virtues. For rather than offering a detached theological discourse, they speak personally, lovingly, in their exhortation to proper action. Under the influence of the *Canticles*, for example, Hildegard has Divine Love use erotic language that one might associate more with *amor* than with *caritas*, beseeching Eberhard, as she does, to take her into his bed as his beloved. It is a very effective means to symbolize Eberhard's Christian responsibilities.

Elsewhere, Hildegard expands the dramatic action further, not just using simple monologues addressed to the recipient but staging a full miniature drama enacted by virtues and vices. In Letter 58 to Dimo of Bamberg, Divine Love and Obedience again appear, here joined on the stage by Humility (*Humilitas*), and a vice, Pride (*Superbia*). As Barbara Newman has pointed out, there are problems of gender in the working out of the dramatic conflict here.<sup>19</sup> Since abstractions are ordinarily feminine in Latin, Hildegard regularly portrays the personified virtues as female, in accordance with their grammatical gender. And yet here *Obedientia* is cast as the masculine figure of a *miles* "knight" and *Superbia*, also feminine in gender, as a male *vernaculus* "serf." One wonders why Hildegard does not here use the perfectly viable feminine noun *bellatrix*, which carries all the military aura while still maintaining the female-ness of the character, as she does in Letter 23, where *justitia* (feminine in gender) is described as a female warrior (*bellatrix*) "batling against injustice."<sup>20</sup> There are also problems of class or decorum, since the highborn Pride is presented as a servile character and Obedience, contrary to the nature of the virtue personified, has to be admonished to perform his duty. "Like many of Hildegard's visions," as Newman remarks (81), "the story on a literal plane is incoherent." Yet, to Hildegard, such minor inconsistencies are unimportant. What matters is the large sense behind the story when Pride is unmasked as Lucifer, and Divine Love is recognized as Christ. On that level the drama works very well indeed.

Sometimes the enactment of the illustrative drama and its relation to the recipient's situation is very complicated indeed. Letter 85r/b to an abbot named Adam, for example, opens up immediately with the allegorical drama: "He Who Is says: The sun shines and sends forth its rays. And a certain man, a friend of the sun, had a garden in which he desired to plant many herbs and flowers." Then there enter into that garden, from the north and east respectively, two representatives of the forces of nature, who also somehow, strangely, represent the virtues and vices (as we learn later from Hildegard's explanation

of the parable): a “contorted figure” with black hair and horrible face and a handsome young man with “bright, shining hair.” The contorted figure confronts the young man, and threatens the destruction of the garden, a threat which he immediately counters, saying that he will cause a fountain to spring up and irrigate the garden and keep it fresh. “Ha!” retorts the old woman in a lively rejoinder, “That is as possible as if locusts would eat through hard rock.” And indeed it is so, for, on one level at least, this is a parable of the year, of the course of the seasons, and so, despite his adamant assertion, the young man idly wanders off playing his harp while winter ravages the garden. When he does finally take notice, he calls the sun back into Taurus and brings the viridity of summer into the garden again.

Then Hildegard makes the application: “Now, you, O father, understand that these words are spoken to you,” for “you have a garden of people, in which as the representative of Christ you seek to plant many wholesome desires and good works.” And so we wind up with the curious situation where the figurative garden is real, that is, with real vegetation subject to the ravages of winter and the rejuvenation of springtime. But the real garden, that is, Adam’s “garden,” is figurative, where one plants “wholesome desires and good works.” Hildegard’s explication is quite lengthy, and she brings on stage the vices and virtues (corresponding to the two figures of the original parable) to work out the meanings dramatically. The scene becomes quite lively: when the virtues, in their turn, oppose the vices, maintaining that they will cause the fountain of living water to flow and preserve the garden, the vices laugh scornfully, countering that that is as possible as fragile flesh remaining forever unblemished and unwrinkled. And so the vices win, just as, in the original scene, winter inevitably comes with its destructive power. Then, at length, the realization is borne in on us that this simple little drama is an explanation of the reason for evil in the world, for “the virtues permit this thing to be done by the just judgment of God, so that men may understand what they are.”

Thus does Hildegard make use of her gift for dramatic presentation to the fullest measure, employing many voices to present her message to the people.

A few words about the present translation are perhaps in order:

The translator of Hildegard’s letters is faced with several imposing difficulties, not least of which is the manuscript tradition and the corollary issue of the authenticity of parts of the correspondence. Until very recently, a reader of the letters was obliged either to use the manuscripts themselves, if he had access to them, or to trust the *Patrologia* edition (vol. 197), a text based on the Riesencodex, a manuscript which, although compiled shortly after Hildegard’s death, is highly unreliable.<sup>21</sup> The inadequacies of the *Patrologia* edition have been addressed by various scholars. As early as 1882, J. Pitra published 145 letters not found in the earlier edition,<sup>22</sup> and, quite recently, Peter Dronke has published text of twelve previously unedited letters.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Monika Klaes has edited the text of three letters between Hildegard and Abbot Gedolphus of Brauweiler in her new critical edition of the *Vita Hildegardis*, shortly to be published as volume 126 of the *Corpus Christianorum* series.<sup>24</sup> Still, this comes

rather short of a definitive edition of all the letters. This deficiency began to be addressed with the publication of two prolegomena toward a new text by Lieven Van Acker in 1988 and 1989, followed shortly by the first volume of his edition of the correspondence, based upon a reassessment of the complexities of the manuscript tradition.<sup>25</sup> When it is completed, this latest edition will be the first genuinely critical text of the entire corpus of the correspondence, the first volume of which forms the basis for the present work, which will be continued as the volumes appear.

The arrangement of the letters will immediately strike the reader as peculiar—if not absolutely wrong-headed. That is because that arrangement is medieval, not modern, hierarchical, not chronological. In order to systematize the material in a logical order, Van Acker adapted a practice, already found in the manuscript tradition, of arranging the letters according to the rank or status of the correspondent,<sup>26</sup> and for this purpose he established ten classifications for the 390 letters and responses. Class I (Letters 1–45r) comprises correspondence with popes (in chronological order), archbishops and bishops (in hierarchical order and alphabetically according to the modern names of their sees). There are certain exceptions to this classification: the letters between Bernard of Clairvaux and Hildegard take the primary position since, as the earliest extant, they mark the beginning of Hildegard’s writing career; Letter 7, to the cardinals Bernard of St. Clement and Gregory of St. Angeli, comes immediately after the correspondence with Pope Eugenius on the grounds that they were acting on the pope’s behalf.<sup>27</sup> The second class (Letters 56–250r) includes those letters to and from ecclesiastics associated with a specific locale; these have been arranged alphabetically by place. Class III (Letters 251–310) contains letters to clergy whose names are known but who cannot be identified geographically; as with Class I, these are also arranged by hierarchy. Class IV (Letters 311–31) includes correspondence with the noble laity, such as King Conrad III and Frederick Barbarossa. Here, too, a hierarchical arrangement is followed. Class V (Letters 332–43) is correspondence to the laity of specific geographical sites arranged, as with Class II, in alphabetical order of place. Class VI (Letters 344–56) comprises correspondence with laity of uncertain geographical location. Class VII (Letters 357–73) includes letters in which there is no decisive evidence of the status, lay or clergy, of the correspondents. Class VIII (Letters 374–90) contains text found in the manuscripts of those letters of dubious epistolary character, such as Hildegard’s sermon against the Cathars (Letter 381), and the greatest portion of *Ad praelatos Moguntinenses (To the Prelates of Mainz)*, some of which forms the basis for Letter 23 in Class I, but most of which is, as Van Acker calls it, “a fused writing.”<sup>28</sup> Class IX is made up of those writings traditionally enumerated with the letters, but which are not of an epistolary nature at all; examples are the *Solutiones XXXVIII Quaestionum (Solutions to 38 Questions)*, which Hildegard sent in response to a request from Guibert of Gembloux, and the *Explanatio Regulae S. Benedicti (Explanation of the Rule of St. Benedict)*, written at the request of a monastery. Class X, the last, contains spurious material, such as falsified letters of Pope Eugenius III and Anastasius IV.<sup>29</sup>

The arrangement of the letters in descending order of importance of correspondents has a certain neatness about it, although it does, as Van Acker himself noted, present problems even for the textual editor.<sup>30</sup> It also causes, one must candidly admit, serious difficulties for the reader, since such a classification does not allow for a smooth flow of themes. With respect to those letters that concern the controversy about Hildegard's protégée Richardis von Stade, for example, the hierarchical arrangement leads to an awkwardly disjunctive account of the matter. Reference solely to the letters translated in the present volume makes the point abundantly clear, and the problem is exacerbated, of course, by the fact that some of the pieces in this complicated matter will appear only in subsequent volumes. We first hear of the case only obliquely in Letter 4 when Pope Eugenius agrees to hand the matter over to Archbishop Heinrich of Mainz. After a space of eight letters, in number 12 Hildegard makes an impassioned appeal for help in the matter to Richardis's brother, Hartwig. In 13, Hartwig informs Hildegard of his sister's death, and in 13r Hildegard expresses her magnanimous sentiments toward the deceased nun. Five letters later (Letter 18) Archbishop Heinrich of Mainz addresses Hildegard in no uncertain terms, ordering her to release Richardis (still alive at this point, of course) to her new position, and Hildegard's response, equally intransigent, is her stubborn refusal to do so. Then there is an interval of forty-six letters before, in Letter 64, Hildegard's lament is addressed directly to the yet-living Richardis.<sup>31</sup>

While the arrangement followed in the edition is not always conducive to a smoothly flowing exposition of the events in Hildegard's life, the reason that we have followed Van Acker's ordering of the text is not far to seek, since, again, his work represents the first reliable edition of the letters in modern times. The other factor to consider is that his text will appear in several volumes, of which only the first is now available.<sup>32</sup> Since the translator is, of course, obliged to make use of the best available edition, we cannot do otherwise than follow his arrangement until such time as the critical edition is published in its entirety and another disposition of the letters, chronological or thematic, becomes practicable.

Even after the establishment of a sound text, however, there remains for the reader—and the translator—the problem of Hildegard's language: her intricately coded vocabulary and her difficulties with the learned language.<sup>33</sup> For certainly, at times, Hildegard can be very obscure indeed, either in the content of a vision or in the way she describes it.<sup>34</sup> An image in Letter 5 will serve to illustrate the point. Here, Hildegard writes Pope Eugenius III in oblique reference to Archbishop Heinrich of Mainz, and she takes the occasion to address one of her favorite themes, the teaching and disciplining of subordinates in the Church: "The mountains, on the other hand, leap over the key to the way of truth, and they do not prepare the way so that they might fly to the mountain of myrrh." The mountains here, as frequently in the letters, apparently represent the ecclesiastical authorities, but Hildegard is content to let the pope dwell on his own on the imagery of their leaping over a key and flying to the mountain of myrrh.<sup>35</sup> Such obscurity, in the words of Gebeno of



Eberbach, is the very nature of the visionary experience, but, unlike the revelations in the *Scivias* and the *Liber Divinorum Operum*, the encoded visions are not, in the letters, uniformly supplied with exegeses to explain their enigmas. There are exceptions, of course, such as her detailed explanation to an abbot of the garden imagery of her vision (Letter 85r/b). Still, that is not the rule. In a letter to Pope Eugenius, for example, she gives the following advice to the pontiff in allegorical form:

A jewel lies on the road, but a bear comes along and seeing that it is very fine stretches out his paw to pick it up and carry it off. But, suddenly, an eagle swoops down and snatches the jewel, wraps it in the covering of its wings, and carries it into the palace of the king. And this jewel shines so splendidly before the king that he sets great store by it, and because of his love of this jewel, he gives the eagle golden slippers, and praises it highly for its uprightness. Now, you who sit as Christ's representative on the throne of the Church, choose the better part so that you may be the eagle who overcomes the bear; in this way, you may adorn the halls of the Church with those souls entrusted to you. Thus you may snatch yourself from this world and enter the regions above in your golden slippers.

Sometimes she opens up a letter immediately with a vision, unexplained in itself, and then directly applies the personified image to the person addressed, as she does to a prior in Letter 47:

He Who Is says: A king saw a ladder darkened by the changes in time of pestilence. But then the sun shone forth and dispelled the darkness. This delighted the king, and he said: This unstable ladder is tired out, because sometimes it reaches to lofty heights and sometimes is overshadowed by darkness.

And your mind is just like this, o man.

With respect to Hildegard's Latinity, it should first of all be observed that there is still some question of just how much Volmar (or, late in her life, Guibert of Gembloux) contributed toward making her Latin as readable as it is.<sup>36</sup> Yet Newman has well observed that "although the seer was self-conscious about her 'unpolished' style, she seems to have cherished it as a mark that her inspiration must be divine because she herself scarcely knew how to write."<sup>37</sup> There we must simply let the matter rest, and, here, merely indicate some of the problems.

A marked feature of Hildegard's style is a general looseness of sentence structure, with phrase attracting phrase, and clause, clause, all strung rather adventitiously together on the thread of the thought. This fact, in and of itself, poses no real problem for the reader, and, in fact, has its own kind of simple charm. Still, at times, this accumulation of qualifying or merely additive elements without clear or unambiguous markers of the logical relationships among the ideas results in a passage of almost impenetrable opacity. Note, for example, the difficulty of threading one's way through the forest of clauses in the following:

*Et quis est homo iste? Scilicet ille qui corpus suum habet sicut ancillam et animam suam sicut dilectissimam dominam. Nam qui etiam ferox est in impietate tamquam ursus, et ferocitatem illam recusat atque ad solem iustitie, qui pius et clemens est, anhelat, hic Deo placet, ita quod Deus illum super precepta sua constituit, dans uirgam ferream in manus ipsius ad erudiendum oues suas ad montem myrrbe. Nunc audi et disce, ut in gustu anime tue super his erubescas, qui aliquando mores ursi habes qui sepe in semetipso occulte murmurat, et etiam interdum mores asini, ita quod non es prouidus in causis tuis, sed tediosus, sed et etiam in aliis quibusdam rebus inutilis; et ideo malitiam ursi aliquando in impietate non perficis. Item mores etiam habes aliorum uolatilium que nec de superioribus nec de infimis sunt, ita quod superiora ea uincunt et quod infima illa ledere non possunt.*

Clearly, the problem here is that matter of the extreme grammatical looseness in the development of the ideas—loose even for Hildegard—with its large number of vague connectives (*nam, et, et etiam, item etiam*) and its non-logical (or logic-defying) use of logical conjunctions (*ita quod, et ideo*). But see Letter 76r for the translation.

A similar problem occurs because Hildegard is sometimes rather vague in her use of pronouns. In her answer to Tengswich of Andernach (52r), for example, Hildegard writes, *Audi: Terra sudat uiriditatem graminis, usque dum eam hiems superat. Et hiems aufert pulchritudinem illius floris, et illa tegit uiriditatem sui floris, deinceps non ualens se reuelare quasi numquam aruerit, quia hiems illam abstulit.* In a passage of such importance for the working out of Hildegard's argument, this imprecise use of such a large number of pronouns in so short a passage—*eam, illius, illa, sui, se, illam*—does little, shall we say, to contribute to clarity.

The problem is vastly compounded, of course, when such negligence with respect to precise rules of grammar is used to express ideas which are themselves highly abstruse, as in the letter to Pope Hadrian (Letter 9), where either the imagery is so contorted as to be intelligible only to the recipient, if in fact even to him, or as to be deliberately indecipherable. In such cases, it has seemed best to translate quite literally, simply following, as faithfully as possible, the words on the page with the Latin text supplied in an endnote.

On a few occasions, on the other hand, when the nature of the material so demanded, we have followed a middle course and taken a phrase or sentence that could be made more presentable, and rendered it into more idiomatic English, where the reader would not have been well served by a literal translation. Such a case is found in Hildegard's response to Tengswich and her congregation in the passage from Letter 52r cited just above. In very literal translation the passage would read: "Hear: the earth sweats forth the viridity of the grass up until the time that winter overcomes it. And the winter takes away the beauty of that flower and it covers the viridity of its flower, not thereafter being able to reveal itself as if it never withered, because the winter has taken it away." In our rendering, we have, we feel, managed to dispel the awkwardness, while retaining the sense and flavor of the original: "Listen: The earth keeps the grass green and vital, until winter conquers it. Then winter takes away the beauty of that flower and covers over its vital force so that it is

unable to manifest itself as if it had never withered up, because winter has ravaged it.” Still, this was a relatively uncomplicated situation, and as long as the Latin text is supplied in an endnote (as we do), the translators can, one would think, do no great harm. But compare the following passage (Letter 15r) where an understanding of the complexity of Hildegard’s thought processes in the letter as a whole is required in order to grasp the full sense of the passage:

But you ought to steep them in the precepts of the law, and thereby restrain them, lest any of them, in his frailty (his marrow, as it were), do whatever he wishes, just as the earth is steeped and restrained by humidity and viridity, lest it turn to ashes. On account of you, however, they are scattered like ashes and always do whatever they wish.

*Nam eos per precepta legis perfundere et constringere deberetis, ne ullus eorum per fragilitatem, quasi per medullam faceret quod sibi eligit, uelut terra humiditate et uiriditate perfusa et constricta est, ne cinis sit. Propter uos autem ut cinis sparguntur et in unaquaque causa que uolunt faciunt.*

The surface meaning here seems clear enough; yet the cosmological sense of this dense passage—the interweaving of the spiritual and the natural—is nigh impossible to render. The general scheme of thought appears to be something like this: priests should so thoroughly soak (*perfundere*) their flocks in the precepts of the law that their very marrow (i.e., their fragility) would be penetrated and strengthened, just as the earth is soaked and strengthened by humidity and viridity, those qualities in the macrocosm—the earth’s marrow, as it were, as she had explained earlier—which correspond to marrow in the little world of man.

It is this complexity of the thought process or the loss of a logical step in that process that frequently causes problems in reading Hildegard. In Letter 77r, for example, she writes, “And just as the secret Son of God came secretly into the world, so, too, He gathered to Himself a foreign nature, that is, those who give up the world and the pomp of the world.” The conception here is quite breathtaking when one fully grasps the movement of the thought. Hildegard begins with a medieval commonplace and enlarges upon it in a strikingly imaginative way: at the incarnation, Christ gathered to Himself a “foreign nature,” that is, the flesh of humanity, but an integral part of this divine taking on of a foreign nature is a gathering to Himself of those holy men and women who have rejected the world and the pomp of the world as foreign nature to themselves—or perhaps it is that in rejecting the world, they, like Christ, have taken on a nature (that is, a heavenly nature) foreign to themselves. The missing logical step here can be supplied by reference to the beginning of the paragraph where the Son of God is described as “gathering to Himself” at His incarnation “two planets,” that is virgins and monks.

With respect to matters of style it should also be noted that Hildegard feels enough at ease with the language to engage in light wordplay and punning, as she does with *auxilium/exsilium* in Letter 20r, *prelatus* (“prelate,” “chosen”) in Letter 5, and *uisceribus* (“bowels” of mercy, “maw” of the devil)-

in Letter 78r. And note the elaborate kind of wordplay in the following passage from Letter 52r:

Let a woman remain within her chamber so that she may preserve her modesty, for the serpent breathed the fiery danger of horrible lust into her. Why should she do this? Because the beauty of woman radiated and blazed forth in the primordial root, and in her was formed that chamber in which every creature lies hidden. Why is she so resplendent? For two reasons: on the one hand, because she was created by the finger of God and, on the other, because she was endowed with wondrous beauty.

*Mulier intra cubiculum lateat, ita quod magnam uerecundiam habeat, quia magna pericula horribilis lasciuie serpens in illam sufflauit. Quomodo? Forma mulieris fulminauit et radiauit in prima radice, in qua formatum est hoc, in quo omnis creatura latet. Quomodo? In duabus partibus, scilicet in altera experte facture digiti Dei, et in altera superne pulchritudinis.*

How delightfully Hildegard plays with the word *cubiculum* in this passage. The word hovers teasingly between the meanings of “bedchamber” (where a woman ought to remain hidden), “woman’s body” (into which can be breathed the breath of life or “the fiery danger of horrible lust”), and “womb” (“in which every creature lies hidden”).

A somewhat different matter with respect to problems of translation has to do with Hildegard’s title as head of a community of nuns. Although popularly referred to in modern work as “Abbess,” Hildegard does not enjoy this title in the letters addressed to her, where she is normally designated *praeposita*, *magistra*, or *priorissa*. The first two we have rendered variously as “mistress” or “superior,” and the latter, of course, as “prioress.” In one letter (13), in fact, her title of *magistra* is pointedly juxtaposed to “abbess” used of a second person. Only once—in a letter from Frederick Barbarossa (not included in this volume)—is she addressed as *abbatissa*.

It must also be noted that, aside from biblical citations, we have generally eschewed the use of quotation marks in this work, avoided, that is, the attempt to set one speaker off from another. That was a deliberate choice. For Hildegard, it seems clear, saw herself as God’s mouthpiece in a time of turmoil, and therefore frequently her voice and His blend so completely that they become utterly indistinguishable. The same is true of the many other voices she employs in her writing: Divine Love, Mercy, et cetera. The following from the letter to the “Shepherds of the Church” (Letter 15r)<sup>38</sup> will illustrate the point. The merging here is not so absolute as in many other passages that might have been cited, but it will serve to make the point clear. For the sake of clarification, we have attempted to sort things out by placing the speaker’s identity in brackets:

From Him the wind blows, saying: [*God*] lacking no power, I have set the firmament with all its ornaments, with eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to taste. [*Hildegard*] For the sun is like the light of His eyes, the wind like the hearing of His ears, the air like His fragrance, the dew like His taste, exuding viridity like His mouth. The moon marks the times of the

seasons, and reveals knowledge to men. And the stars, which seem to be rational, are indeed so, because they are circular, just as rationality embraces many things. [God] I shored up the four corners of the earth with fire, cloud, and water.

In such mystic writing, it seems a fruitless—not to say, hopeless—task to clarify by modern punctuation marks that which, apparently, was never intended to be clear.

A note about gender is in order. When Hildegard speaks of people in this world, her language tends to be quite generalized, universal. *Homo*, *homines* (“human being,” “people”) occur very frequently, while *vir* (“man”), *virī* (“men”), *mulier* (“woman”), *femina* (“female person”) appear only rarely. Indeed, sometimes she uses *homines* when *virī* might well have been the more natural form. Moreover, when the voice from the Living Light speaks directly to her, a *paupercula*—a feminine form, which we have usually rendered “poor little woman”—it is not, as might have been expected, with *O mulier*, *O femina*, or even with the title made so respectable by the Holy Virgin *O ancilla*, but with the awesome *O homo*. In our work we have attempted to retain this generalized sense of mankind that Hildegard is addressing, but it must be acknowledged that such usage is much more natural to Medieval Latin than to Modern English, and we have not hesitated to vary *mankind* with generic *man*<sup>39</sup> and sometimes to render *homines* with *men*. As long as the distinctions are clear and Hildegard’s point is not smothered under, this has seemed to us the proper course. We have striven at all times for clear, well-modulated English prose uncluttered by awkward attempts to skirt around modern sensitivities.

All biblical quotations in the text are followed immediately by notation of exact source (book, chapter, verse, as needed) in brackets. Save for a few instances where the rigors of the context required a fresh translation, all such quotations are rendered by the language of the Douay version.

In conclusion, let us cite Hildegard herself, who seems to indicate the way to render her writings when she signifies the difficulty of putting mystic things into human speech:

But He who is great and without flaw has now touched a humble dwelling, so that it might see a miracle and form unknown letters and utter an unknown tongue. And this was said to that little habitation: You have written these things in a language given to you from above, rather than in ordinary human speech, since it was not revealed to you in that form, but let him who has the pumice stone not fail to polish it and make it intelligible to mankind.

In this our effort, we trust we have used the pumice stone well to present a still-living Hildegard by treating her mysteries with respect, while, as much as possible within the constraints of her visionary, admonitory genre, rendering her thoughts accurately both in her clarity and her obscurity. For *in his epistolis*, to paraphrase Richard de Bury on the virtue of books, *mortuam quasi vivam inveniebamus*, “in these letters we have found the dead woman as if still alive.”

## Notes

1. See *Vita* II.i.16; *Scivias*, “Protestificatio.”
2. See B. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), esp. pp. 34–41.
3. So the text *manu propria scripsit*. This is extraordinary paleographical evidence of an author physically writing rather than simply dictating, as was usually the case, even with learned writers. A thirteenth-century miniature in a copy of *De operatione Dei* provides some corroboration: Hildegard is depicted transcribing the message from heaven onto wax tablets, while Volmar writes the finished copy in a book.
4. See C. Hart and J. Bishop, trans., *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 59.
5. “Problemata Hildegardiana,” *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch* 16 (1981), pp. 107–14.
6. On *pigmentarius* and the following *vivens odor*, see Hart and Bishop, trans., *Scivias*, “Translator’s Note,” p. 55. The term *pigmentarius* itself is from the Scripture. See Canticles 5.13.
7. See G. Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections*, fasc. 17 of *Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental* (Turnholt: Brepols, 1976), p. 11, “In view of the way in which letters were written and sent, and also of the standards of literacy in the Middle Ages, it is doubtful whether there were any private letters in the modern sense of the term.”
8. Medieval friendship tended to be very profuse and lavish in its terms of expression in any case, and we should resist the propensity to view such expressions as insincere.
9. Constable, *Letters*, pp. 48, 53–54.
10. See A. Haverkamp, “Tenxwind von Andernach und Hildegard von Bingen: Zwei ‘Weltanschauungen’ in der Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts,” *Institutionen, Kultur und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter. Festschrift für Josef Fleckenstein*, eds. L. Fenske, W. Rösener, and T. Zotz, p. 517 and esp. pp. 543–45 for a dual-column comparison. Also L. Van Acker, ed., *Hildegardis Bingenensis Epistolarium: Prima Pars, in Corpus Christianorum: continuatio medievalis*, vol. 91 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1991), p. lx.
11. The buying and selling of Church offices, so called from Simon Magus of Acts 8.18–24, who sought to buy grace from Peter.
12. In 1167 in a famous battle, Christian de Buch, archbishop of Mainz, led the imperial forces against the Romans during their siege of Tusculum, and literally demolished their army, killing some 9,000 out of 30,000 men, and taking 5,000 prisoners. But perhaps a specific instance of senseless cruelty will make the point even better. In 1183, the Romans—who were notorious for their capricious vacillation between hatred for, and support of, whoever the reigning pontiff happened to be—captured a number of loyal adherents to the pope. First, they put out the eyes of all of the men but one. Then, they set paper mitres on their heads, labeling each with the name of a cardinal, save for the one intended for the pope, on which they inscribed “Lucius, the wicked simoniac.” Finally, they mounted them all backward on asses, and sent them off to the pope, with the only unblinded one left to guide the way.
13. See especially Haverkamp, “Tenxwind.”
14. The steadily increasing intensity of the Church decrees against heresy from about mid-twelfth century on into the thirteenth is a clear signal of the growing power and influence of the various sects.
15. It is true that hostile witnesses accused them of all sorts of abuses, especially sexual irregularity and debauchery (standard fare, after all, for heretics), but Hildegard herself is a witness to the austerity of their lives.

16. But see P. Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 171–83, who sees the influence of Manichaean ideas on Hildegard's work.

17. See Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 34–41.

18. See especially Dronke, "Hildegard of Bingen as Poetess and Dramatist," in his *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry 1000–1500* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 150–92. Dronke's essay also contains a critical edition of the *Ordo Virtutum*.

19. *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 80–82.

20. See also *Victoria bellatrix* at *Scivias* III.xiii.429 and *vis animae . . . contra omnem fallaciam diaboli bellatrix* ("the might of the soul—a female warrior against every deception of the devil") at *Liber divinorum operum* I.iv.91.

21. Many of the letters, for example, have been spuriously reassigned to correspondents of higher social status so as to enhance Hildegard's standing in the world, and, moreover, some letters have been conflated with others. See note 29.

22. J. B. Pitra, ed., *Analecta Sanctae Hildegardis*, vol. 8 of *Analecta Sacra* (Monte Cassino, 1882).

23. Dronke, *Women Writers*, pp. 256–64. In addition, F. Haug, "Epistolae sanctae Hildegardis secundum codicem Stuttgartensem," *Revue bénédictine* 43 (1931), 59–71, examined the texts of several letters in the Stuttgart manuscript. For further particulars on the difficulties of the manuscript tradition of Hildegard's letters, the following are of primary importance: B. Schmeidler, "Bemerkungen zum Corpus der Briefe der hl. Hildegard von Bingen," *Corona Quernea: Festgabe Karl Strecker zum 80. Geburtstage dargebracht* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann Verlag, 1952), pp. 335–66; M. Schrader and A. Führkötter, *Die Echtheit des Schrifttums der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen* (Cologne and Graz: Bohlau-Verlag, 1956).

24. Van Acker elected to defer to Professor Klaes and did not include these letters in his edition. We are very grateful to Professor Klaes for her generosity in supplying us the text of the correspondence before the publication of her edition.

25. L. Van Acker, "Der Briefwechsel der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen: Vorbemerkungen zu einer kritischen Edition," *Revue bénédictine* 98 (1988), pp. 141–68, and 99 (1989), pp. 118–54; Van Acker, ed., *Epistolarium*.

26. *Epistolarium*, "Einleitung," pp. lxiii–lxviii, from which the following remarks are taken.

27. *Epistolarium*, "Einleitung," p. lxiv. Other exceptions are Letter 15 to Philip of Heinsberg and Letter 29 to Arnold of St. Andreas in Cologne for they would later become archbishops. Van Acker has included Letter 23 to the prelates of Mainz in Class I on the grounds that they represented Archbishop Christian I while he was in Rome; Odo of Soissons finds himself here since he would later assume the title of Cardinal-Bishop of Tusculum.

28. *Epistolarium*, "Einleitung," p. lxvi; cf. Schrader and Führkötter *Echtheit*, pp. 158f; "Vorbemerkungen" (1989), pp. 130f, 152ff.

29. See *Echtheit*, pp. 121f.

30. *Epistolarium*, "Einleitung," pp. lxvii–lxviii.

31. Hildegard's vehement letter to Richardis's mother falls into a different class and is not translated in the current volume.

32. Van Acker has informed us in personal correspondence that volume II will contain the remainder of the letters that make up Class II (91–250).

33. As Robert Carver has recently noted (F. Bowie and O. Davies, *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystical Writings* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 60): "Hildegard is capable of

writing with a simplicity and grace that are truly moving. Yet the beauty of what she is describing is often marred by the ineptitude of her expression.”

34. See Dronke, *Poetic Individuality*, pp. 178f; Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 24f.

35. The mountain of myrrh is an image taken from Canticles 4.6, “*vadam ad montem myrrhae*,” and represents God’s presence, as opposed to the mountains representing the Church authorities. Cf. Letter 7.

36. See I. Herwegen, “Les collaborateurs de Ste. Hildegarde,” *Revue bénédictine* 21 (1904), 192–203, 302–15, 381–403; Schrader and Führkötter, *Echtheit*, pp. 143ff, 180ff; Dronke, *Women Writers*, pp. 148, 307, note 11; Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 22ff.

37. *Sister of Wisdom*, p. 23. See the remarks of Gebeno of Eberbach, the thirteenth-century compiler of an abridgement of Hildegard’s works entitled *Speculum futurorum temporum* (Pitra, ed., *Analecta*, pp. 483–88), “Most people dislike and shrink from reading St. Hildegard’s books, because she speaks obscurely and in an unusual style—not understanding that this is a proof of true prophecy” (translated by Newman, p. 22).

38. On this matter, see Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, pp. 26f.

39. The real problem lies principally, of course, in the use of pronouns, a difficulty that is proportionate to the length of the passage, for there is no really appropriate pronoun to be used to refer to *mankind*. What does one say, *it* and *its*?



# The Letters

1<sup>1</sup>

## Hildegard to Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux

1146–47

Hildegard was forty-nine years old at the time she wrote this letter to the illustrious Bernard of Clairvaux. At once confident about her gift and hesitant about its implications, she writes to Bernard as her most famous contemporary, seeking support for her work. Here, as throughout her life, she is absolutely assured of her own divine inspiration and illumination by the Holy Spirit, a point that receives special stress here, of course, because of the nature of the request. Nevertheless, the tone of the letter is timid and diffident, a far cry indeed from the thundering tones she will later adopt to condemn the ecclesiastical and secular leaders of her time.

O<sup>2</sup> venerable father Bernard, I lay my claim before you, for, highly honored by God, you bring fear to the immoral foolishness of this world and, in your intense zeal and burning love for the Son of God, gather men [cf. Luke 5.10] into Christ's army to fight under the banner of the cross against pagan savagery.<sup>3</sup> I beseech you in the name of the Living God to give heed to my queries.

Father, I am greatly disturbed by a vision which has appeared to me through divine revelation, a vision seen not with my fleshly eyes but only in my spirit. Wretched, and indeed more than wretched in my womanly condition, I have from earliest childhood<sup>4</sup> seen great marvels which my tongue has no power to express but which the Spirit of God has taught me that I may believe.<sup>5</sup> Steadfast and gentle father, in your kindness respond to me, your unworthy servant, who has never, from her earliest childhood, lived one hour free from anxiety. In your piety and wisdom look in your spirit, as you have been taught by the Holy Spirit, and from your heart bring comfort to your handmaiden.

Through this vision which touches my heart and soul like a burning flame, teaching me profundities of meaning, I have an inward understanding of the Psalter, the Gospels, and other volumes. Nevertheless, I do not receive this knowledge in German. Indeed, I have no formal training at all, for I know how to read only on the most elementary level, certainly with no deep analysis.<sup>5</sup> But please give me your opinion in this matter, because I am untaught and untrained in exterior material, but am only taught inwardly, in my spirit. Hence my halting, unsure speech.<sup>b</sup>

When I hear from your pious wisdom, I will be comforted. For with the single exception of a certain monk<sup>6</sup> in whose exemplary life I have the utmost confidence, I have not dared to tell these things to anyone, since there are so many heresies abroad in the land,<sup>7</sup> as I have heard. I have, in fact, revealed all my secrets to this man, and he has given me consolation, for these are great and fearsome matters.

Now, father, for the love of God, I seek consolation from you, that I may be assured. More than two years ago, indeed, I saw you in a vision, like a man looking straight into the sun, bold and unafraid. And I wept, because I myself am so timid and fearful. Good and gentle father, I have been placed in your care so that you might reveal to me through our correspondence whether I should speak these things openly or keep my silence, because I have great anxiety about this vision with respect to how much I should speak about what I have seen and heard.<sup>c</sup> In the meantime, because I have kept silent about this vision, I have been laid low, bedridden in my infirmities, and am unable to raise myself up.

Therefore, I weep with sorrow before you. For in my nature, I am unstable because I am caught in the winepress,<sup>8</sup> that tree rooted in Adam by the devil's deceit which brought about his exile into this wayward world. Yet, now, rising up, I run to you. And I say to you: You are not inconstant, but are always lifting up the tree, a victor in your spirit, lifting up not only yourself but also the whole world unto salvation. You are indeed the eagle gazing directly at the sun.

And so I beseech your aid, through the serenity of the Father and through His wondrous Word and through the sweet moisture of compunction, the Spirit of truth [cf. John 14.17; 16.13], and through that holy sound, which all creation echoes, and through that same Word which gave birth to the world, and through the sublimity of the Father, who sent the Word with sweet fruitfulness<sup>9</sup> into the womb of the Virgin, from which He soaked up flesh, just as honey is surrounded by the honeycomb.<sup>10</sup> And may that Sound, the power of the Father, fall upon your heart and lift up your spirit so that you may respond expeditiously to these words of mine, taking care, of course, to seek all these things from God—with regard to the person or the mystery itself—while you are passing through the gateway of your soul,<sup>d</sup> so that you may come to know all these things in God. Farewell, be strong in your spirit, and be a mighty warrior for God. Amen.

## Notes

1. Within this first group (Letters 1–45r) is the correspondence with high Church officials: popes, archbishops, bishops, etc. On the classification of the Letters, see Introduction, pp. 17–18.

2. In some MSS this letter opens with “In the spirit of the mysteries of God, O venerable father Bernard.”

3. The year is 1147, the time of the Second Crusade, of which St. Bernard was, of course, a leading proponent.

4. In one of the autobiographical sections of the *Vita* (see the edited version in Dronke, *Women Writers*, p. 231), Hildegard writes of these early visions: “In the third year of my life I saw so bright a light that my very soul trembled, but because I was still an infant, I was unable to say anything. Then in my eighth year I was dedicated to the spiritual life as an offering to God, and until my fifteenth I saw many things, and I spoke of such things in a very simple way, so that those who heard me wondered where all this had come from—and from whom. And I too wondered at myself, because although I saw these things deep in my soul, I still retained outer vision, and I have never heard that said of any other human being. And so I hid that vision I saw within my soul as best I could. Also, I was quite ignorant of many things in the outer world on account of the chronic illness I have suffered from the time of my mother’s milk up to the present day; it has weakened my body and worn down my spirits. Worn out by all these things, I once asked my nurse if she saw anything besides external objects. “Nothing,” she answered, for she did not see any of those things. Then, seized with great fear, I did not dare to reveal such matters to anyone. Nevertheless, by speaking or writing, I used to make many assertions about future events, and when I was fully in the sway of this vision I would say many things totally unfathomable to those who listened. But when the force of the vision subsided somewhat—in the course of which I had acted far more childishly than suited my years—I blushed profusely and frequently wept, and many times I would have gladly kept quiet, if I could have. Still, because of my fear of other people, I did not dare to tell anyone *how* I saw.

5. Our rendering of this difficult passage is, we are fully aware, a radical departure from previous readings. In the past, the passage has been interpreted, in the most radical form, to mean that Hildegard did not understand German at all, and, more moderately, that she could speak and understand the language orally but could not read it—neither of which could be true from what we know of her from other sources. In our rendering, the German language is, as it were, merely incidental to the passage. Hildegard’s main point in this entire section has been that her learning is of the spirit, wholly inward, and that she herself is ignorant and unlearned (whatever degree of credence we wish to give to this humility formula), and this continues to be her stress here. One might note, for example, that *litteras*, not *Teutonica lingua*, is the antecedent of *quas*. It is *litteras* (“letters,” “learning”) that she does not know, an acknowledgment that leads quite naturally in the next clause to her remark about reading only on the simplest level, not at all *in absconsione textus*. One might note, too, that in his answer to her Bernard refers to her *interior eruditio*. The muddying *Teutonica*, one suspects, gets into the passage at this point—very awkwardly, to be sure—merely because she is frequently asked, as she is later by Guibert of Gembloux, whether she receives her visions in German or in Latin.

6. This was Volmar of St. Disibod, who was Hildegard’s early teacher, and who remained her confidant, secretary, amanuensis, and friend for many years until his death in 1173. Speaking in the *Scivias*, the Living Light says, “Through my love she searched

her soul for one who would run the way of salvation. And she found him and loved him, knowing that he was a faithful man, like to herself in those labors that lead to me. She held him fast, and with the highest zeal they worked together on all these things so that my hidden mysteries might be revealed.”

7. *schismata sunt in hominibus*. This is not the schism in the Church (which, in any case, did not begin until 1159), as her qualifying *in hominibus, sicut audio dicere homines* makes clear. She probably has reference to the various schismatic sects with which the twelfth century was rife. When Pope Eugenius III came into France in 1147, for example, he was shocked at the large number of heretics there, and, in fact, he commissioned the recipient of this letter, Bernard, to deal with them. See S. Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 119.

8. Hildegard's expression here is *in torculari arbore*, an interesting example of her sometimes intricately complex and interwoven imagery. Here the image seems to be a fusion of the tree of the garden of Eden and the winepress (where the grapes of wrath are trod) of Isaiah 63.3, already being used in the twelfth century as a figure of the crucifixion. Cf. the following from the *Scivias* (I.iii.31.623ff): “A bright light appeared for the assurance and salvation of mankind: the Son of God dressed himself in the poverty of a human body, and shining like a burning star in the midst of shadowy clouds, He was placed on the winepress where wine without the sediment of fermentation was to be pressed out. For the cornerstone itself fell on the winepress, and produced such wine that it gave forth the finest fragrance of sweetness.”

9. The word here is *viriditate*, a totally untranslatable term, as one might expect. “Greenness” or “greening” (as it is sometimes rendered), for example, certainly cannot render the immensity of the term for Hildegard. *Viriditas* is of the very essence of life, and larger than life in Hildegard's view of the universe. It might perhaps be best rendered as “life-force,” for it, assuredly, has that sense in her imposing cosmological scheme of things. For further on *viriditas*, see C. Meier, “Die Bedeutung der Farben im Werk Hildegards von Bingen,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 6 (1972), pp. 280–90; B. Newman, ed. *Symphonia: A Critical Edition of the Symphonia Armonie Celestium Revelationum* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 38f; Bowie and Davies, *Mystical Writings*, pp. 31ff.

10. The image of the womb of the Virgin as a honeycomb or beehive derives ultimately from the notion of bees giving birth virginally. The idea is given full expression in the following stanza of a poem from the so-called Cambridge Songs preserved in a MS of the eleventh century:

Nulla inter aves similis est api,  
que talem tipum gerit castitatis  
nisi que Christum baiulavit alvo  
inviolata.

1r

# Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux to Hildegard

1146–47

St. Bernard's response to Hildegard is short and (it must be confessed) rather perfunctory. A short time later, however, he speaks in Hildegard's favor before Pope Eugenius at the synod of Trier, and helps persuade him to give approval to her work.

Brother Bernard, called Abbot of Clairvaux, offers to Hildegard, beloved daughter in Christ, whatever the prayer of a sinner can accomplish.

It is perhaps to be attributed to your humility that you appear to have a higher regard for our poor abilities than I myself would admit. All the same, I have made some effort to respond to your letter of love, although the press of business forces me to respond more briefly than I would have liked.

We rejoice in the grace of God which is in you. And, further, we most earnestly urge and beseech you to recognize this gift as grace and to respond eagerly to it with all humility and devotion, with the knowledge that "God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" [James 4.6; I Pet 5.5].<sup>1</sup> But, on the other hand, when the learning and the anointing (which reveals all things to you) are within, what advice could we possibly give?<sup>2</sup>

And so we ask all the more, and humbly beseech, that you remember us before God, and not only us but also those who are bound to us in spiritual community.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. This is a theme (with the same biblical verses being cited) that Hildegard is to hear again and again. The stress on humility is not, of course, unusual, but it seems particularly prominent in exhortations to Hildegard, because of the problem of gender. See Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, esp. pp. 34–41.

2. At about the time Bernard was responding to Hildegard's letter, Pope Eugenius was already receiving word of Hildegard's visions, and a copy of an early portion of the *Scivias* was sent to him. Eugenius read from this work to the prelates assembled at the synod of Trier (November 1147–February 1148), and at just this point, Bernard interceded on Hildegard's behalf, with the happy result that Eugenius wrote Hildegard encouraging her to continue her work. Some MSS add the following sentence at this point: "It is said that you see celestial secrets, and, with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, learn things beyond the sight of mortals."

3. Some MSS add the following as a conclusion of this letter: "Since your spirit is joined to God, we are confident that you can be of great service to us and come to our aid. For 'the continual prayer of a just man availeth much' [James 5.16]. We, for our

On behalf of our beloved daughter in Christ, Hildegard, prioress of Mount St. Rupert in Bingen<sup>a</sup> and of the sisters of that place, you should know that it has come to our attention that when, according to their custom, they had elected for themselves a master and provost from the monastery of St. Disibod, the abbot of that place was unwilling to acknowledge the election of the person from his monastery, and even up to the present time still refuses to assign that person to them. Wherefore since it is proper that there be provision for the aforementioned sisters in those things which pertain to the salvation of their souls, we mandate to your discretion through apostolic writings that you call together both sides to your presence once you have made inquiry into this and have more clearly understood this matter of the election of the provost. Then decide the case with proper justice. And if these sisters cannot have a provost from that monastery, see to it, at least, that they have a competent one from another.

## 11

# Hildegard to Hartwig, Archbishop of Bremen

After 1148

This letter has little more to say than greetings and compliment. Is this one of those instances where the “meat” of the letter was delivered by the messenger himself? Hartwig belonged to the noble and highly connected von Stade family. His mother Richardis was an early and strong supporter of Hildegard, and his sister, also Richardis, was Hildegard’s most beloved nun.

May the One Who saw you on the first day look upon you and direct you to His will, He Who gave you eyes to see and wings to fly, and Who made mankind a mirror of the fulness of all his miracles, so that the knowledge of God shines in him, as it is written, “You are gods and all of you are sons of the most High” [Ps 81.6].

When a person’s reason imitates God, he touches God, Who has neither beginning nor end, for the knowledge of good and evil reveals God. Such is the wheel of eternity.

May God see to it that you flee that evil which arose on the first day and which, lacking good will, stands always opposed to God. May He also make windows in you which shine in the heavenly Jerusalem [cf. I Heb 12.22], windows beautifully glazed with the virtues.<sup>a</sup> And may He cause you to fly in the embraces of God’s love, just as the one anointed by God’s spirit said: “Who are these, that fly as clouds, and as doves to their windows?” [Is 60.8].

For I, a poor little form of a woman, have seen the light of salvation in you. Now, fulfill the precepts of God which his grace gives, and the Holy Spirit teaches you.

## 12

# Hildegard to Hartwig, Archbishop of Bremen

1151–52

This letter is one in a series of efforts by Hildegard to retrieve the nun Richardis, Hartwig's sister. Soon after moving to Mount St. Rupert, Hildegard suffered her greatest loss: Richardis, her beloved disciple, who had assisted her with the *Scivias*. Richardis, apparently out of her own wishes, was elected abbess of Bassum, but Hildegard, at first, refused to grant permission for her move. This letter to Hartwig, asking him to intervene in the matter is actually a late entry in the controversy. Hildegard had already written in complaint to Richardis's mother, as well as a missile of a letter to the archbishop of Mainz (Letter 18r), who had written to Hildegard demanding that she release Richardis to her new post. In a final effort, Hildegard wrote an appeal to Pope Eugenius, the text of which has not come down to us, though the pope's response has (Letter 4).

You are a man worthy of great praise, as one must be who holds the episcopal office in direct succession from almighty God Himself.<sup>a</sup> Therefore, may your eye see God, your intellect grasp His justice, and your heart burn brightly in the love of God, so that your spirit may not grow weak. Be zealous to build the tower of celestial Jerusalem [cf. Heb 12.22], and may God give you that sweetest mother Mercy as your assistant. Be a bright star shining in the darkness of the night of wicked men, and be a swift hart running to the fountain of living water [cf. John 4.10]. Be alert, for many shepherds are blind and halt nowadays, and they are seizing the lucre of death, choking out God's justice.

O dear man, your soul is dearer to me than your family.<sup>1</sup> Now hear me, cast down as I am, miserably weeping at your feet. My spirit is exceedingly sad, because a certain horrible man has trampled underfoot my desire and will (and not mine alone, but also my sisters' and friends'), and has rashly dragged our beloved daughter Richardis out of our cloister.<sup>2</sup> Since God knows all things, He knows where pastoral care is useful, and so let no person of faith canvass for such an office.<sup>b</sup> Thus if anyone, in his madness, willfully seeks to gain ecclesiastic office, he is a rapacious wolf seeking the delights of power more than the will of God. The soul of such a person, therefore, never seeks spiritual office with proper faith.<sup>3</sup> Therein lies simony.

It was, therefore, inappropriate for our abbot, in his blindness and ignorance, to involve this holy soul in this affair and, in the blindness of his spirit,

to encourage such great temerity. If our daughter had remained content, God would have fulfilled his glorious purpose for her.

I do not oppose any selection God has made, nor would I ever do so. Therefore, in the name of Him who gave His life for you and in the name of his holy Mother, I beseech you, you who hold the episcopal office in the order of Melchisedech [cf. Ps 109.4; Heb 5.6, 6.20], to send my dearest daughter back to me.<sup>4</sup> If you do so, God will give you the blessing which Isaac gave to his son Jacob [cf. Gen 27.27–29] and which He gave through his angel to Abraham for his obedience [cf. Gen 22.15–18].

Hear me now, and do not cast off my words, as your mother, your sister, and Count Hermann have all done. I am doing you no harm not consonant with the will of God and the salvation of your sister's soul, but I seek to be consoled through her and her through me. What God has ordained, I do not oppose.<sup>c</sup>

May God grant you the blessing of the dew of heaven [cf. Gen 27.28], and may all the choirs of angels bless you if you listen to me, God's servant, and if you fulfill God's will in this matter.

### Notes

1. *amabilis anima tua pre genere tuo*. The remark is not, it seems clear, an invidious one, that is, that he is dearer to her than his family since they have already turned down her request. It is rather an attempt to put the case on the proper footing: that spiritual matters take precedence over familial influence and power, which is her whole argument here. Our thanks to Barbara Newman for her assistance in helping us understand the point being made.

2. Hildegard is speaking of Abbot Kuno of St. Disibod, for whom she has little affection in any case, since, among other things, he had attempted to prevent her move to Mount St. Rupert.

3. Here, as elsewhere, Hildegard, in her grief, comes perilously close to accusing Richardis of simony, though much of the blame is shunted off onto Kuno. Interestingly, Richardis was still with Hildegard when she wrote similar warnings about seeking office against God's will. See *Scivias* III.vi.474ff and III.ix.561ff.

4. Bassum lay in Hartwig's diocese, and thus he would indeed have had the authority to return Richardis.

## 13

# Hartwig, Archbishop of Bremen, to Hildegard

1152

This touching letter informing Hildegard of the sudden, unexpected death of Richardis represents the last, sad duty of the brother, in this case, the brother



who had stood firm against all of Hildegard's attempts to retrieve Richardis. It is almost as if Hildegard had been right all along (a thought which must surely have been in the minds of all those who had held firm against her), that Richardis should never have left her side. To her everlasting praise, Hildegard's answer to this letter is magnanimous and forgiving.

Hartwig, archbishop of Bremen, brother of the abbess Richardis, sends that which is in the place of a sister and more than a sister, obedience, to Hildegard, mistress of the sisters of St. Rupert.<sup>1</sup>

I write to inform you that our sister—my sister in body, but yours in spirit—has gone the way of all flesh, little esteeming that honor I bestowed upon her. And (while I was on my way to see the earthly king) she was obedient to her lord, the heavenly King. I am happy to report that she made her last confession in a saintly and pious way and that after her confession she was anointed with consecrated oil. Moreover, filled with her usual Christian spirit, she tearfully expressed her longing for your cloister with her whole heart. She then committed herself to the Lord through His mother and St. John. And sealed three times with the sign of the cross, she confessed the Trinity and Unity of God, and died on October 29 in perfect faith, hope, and charity [cf. I Cor 13.13], as we know for certain. Thus I ask as earnestly as I can, if I have any right to ask, that you love her as much as she loved you, and if she appeared to have any fault—which indeed was mine, not hers—at least have regard for the tears that she shed for your cloister, which many witnessed. And if death had not prevented, she would have come to you as soon as she was able to get permission. But since death did intervene, be assured that, God willing, I will come in her place. May God, who repays all good deeds, recompense you fully in this world and in the future for all the good things you did for her, you alone, more even than relatives or friends; may He repay that benevolence of yours which she rejoiced in before God and me. Please convey my thanks to your sisters for all their kindness.

### *Note*

1. It would be difficult to cite a more poignant and at the same time more obdurate insistence on recognition of the proper hierarchy. Even in this grieving report of Richardis's death, Hartwig stresses the difference in social station: his sister's office was the higher, "*Richardis abbatisse*," "*Hildegardi magistre sororum*."

## 13r

Hildegard to Hartwig,  
Archbishop of Bremen

1152

This is Hildegard's magnanimous, sad response to Hartwig's letter informing her of Richardis's death. All acrimony gone, all hints of simony laid aside, Hildegard's letter is a eulogy on the beauty and holiness of her beloved nun.

O how great a miracle there is in the salvation of those souls so looked upon by God that His glory has no hint of shadow in them. But He works in them like a mighty warrior who takes care not to be defeated by anyone, so that his victory may be sure.

Just so, dear man, was it with my daughter Richardis, whom I call both daughter and mother, because I cherished her with divine love, as indeed the Living Light had instructed me to do in a very vivid vision.

God favored her so greatly that worldly desire had no power to embrace her. For she always fought against it, even though she was like a flower in her beauty and loveliness in the symphony of this world.<sup>a</sup> While she was still living in the body, in fact, I heard the following words concerning her in a true vision: "O virginity, you are standing in the royal bridal chamber."<sup>1</sup> Now, in the tender shoot of virginity, she has been made a part of that most holy order, and the daughters of Zion rejoice [Zeph 3.14, Zach 2.10, 9.9]. But the ancient serpent had attempted to deprive her of that blessed honor by assaulting her through her human nobility.<sup>2</sup> Yet the mighty Judge drew this my daughter to Himself, cutting her off from all human glory. Therefore, although the world loved her physical beauty and her worldly wisdom while she was still alive, my soul has the greatest confidence in her salvation. For God loved her more. Therefore, He was unwilling to give His beloved to a heartless lover, that is, to the world.<sup>3</sup>

Now you, dear Hartwig, you who sit as Christ's representative, fulfill the desire of your sister's soul, as obedience demands. And just as she always had your interests at heart, so you now take thought for her soul, and do good works as she wished. Now, as for me, I cast out of my heart that grief you caused me in the matter of this my daughter. May God grant you, through the prayers of the saints, the dew of His grace and reward in the world to come.

## Notes

1. Hildegard is quoting herself. See *Ordo Virtutum*, v. 104.
2. This, apparently, is an oblique reference to Hildegard's muted simony charge, Richardis's gaining the office through the influence of her family.

## 13r

Hildegard to Hartwig,  
Archbishop of Bremen

1152

This is Hildegard's magnanimous, sad response to Hartwig's letter informing her of Richardis's death. All acrimony gone, all hints of simony laid aside, Hildegard's letter is a eulogy on the beauty and holiness of her beloved nun.

O how great a miracle there is in the salvation of those souls so looked upon by God that His glory has no hint of shadow in them. But He works in them like a mighty warrior who takes care not to be defeated by anyone, so that his victory may be sure.

Just so, dear man, was it with my daughter Richardis, whom I call both daughter and mother, because I cherished her with divine love, as indeed the Living Light had instructed me to do in a very vivid vision.

God favored her so greatly that worldly desire had no power to embrace her. For she always fought against it, even though she was like a flower in her beauty and loveliness in the symphony of this world.<sup>a</sup> While she was still living in the body, in fact, I heard the following words concerning her in a true vision: "O virginity, you are standing in the royal bridal chamber."<sup>1</sup> Now, in the tender shoot of virginity, she has been made a part of that most holy order, and the daughters of Zion rejoice [Zeph 3.14, Zach 2.10, 9.9]. But the ancient serpent had attempted to deprive her of that blessed honor by assaulting her through her human nobility.<sup>2</sup> Yet the mighty Judge drew this my daughter to Himself, cutting her off from all human glory. Therefore, although the world loved her physical beauty and her worldly wisdom while she was still alive, my soul has the greatest confidence in her salvation. For God loved her more. Therefore, He was unwilling to give His beloved to a heartless lover, that is, to the world.<sup>3</sup>

Now you, dear Hartwig, you who sit as Christ's representative, fulfill the desire of your sister's soul, as obedience demands. And just as she always had your interests at heart, so you now take thought for her soul, and do good works as she wished. Now, as for me, I cast out of my heart that grief you caused me in the matter of this my daughter. May God grant you, through the prayers of the saints, the dew of His grace and reward in the world to come.

## Notes

1. Hildegard is quoting herself. See *Ordo Virtutum*, v. 104.

2. This, apparently, is an oblique reference to Hildegard's muted simony charge, Richardis's gaining the office through the influence of her family.

3. *Sed Deus illam plus dilexit. Idcirco noluit Deus amicam suam dare inimico amatori, id est mundo.* The blending of secular and divine love in this paragraph, or, perhaps better, the expression of divine love in earthly terms is simply exquisite: the beautiful, highborn lady, beloved for both her beauty and her wit and wooed by two very different lovers, is carried off by the worthiest of the two.

## 14

# Arnold, Archbishop of Cologne, to Hildegard

1150–56(?)

The archbishop of Cologne writes to ask Hildegard to send him a copy of the *Scivias*. Van Acker indicates some little latitude (1150–56) for the date of this letter, and even then with an additional question mark. If the requested book “which you wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit” is indeed—and there seems no reason to doubt that it is—the *Scivias* (“whether it is complete or not”), one would think that an earlier date (say, 1150–52) might be more appropriate, since the *Scivias* was finished in 1151.

Arnold, archbishop of Cologne by the grace of God, to Hildegard, a blazing lantern in the house of the Lord at Mount St. Rupert. May you forever remain in the protection of the God of Heaven.

If you are well, with all things around you being directed by the Lord, we rejoice. Thanks to your merits with the Lord, we also are well. We are, however, unable to visit you as we had planned some time ago. Nevertheless, we entrust ourselves to you as far as we can at the present time, putting our hands into yours, joining our faith to yours, completely commending ourselves to you.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to send, through the good offices of the present messenger, that book which you wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For whether it is complete or not, we are neither willing nor able to do without it—not because we wish to tempt God, but because we long to see His miracles.

3. *Sed Deus illam plus dilexit. Idcirco noluit Deus amicam suam dare inimico amatori, id est mundo.* The blending of secular and divine love in this paragraph, or, perhaps better, the expression of divine love in earthly terms is simply exquisite: the beautiful, highborn lady, beloved for both her beauty and her wit and wooed by two very different lovers, is carried off by the worthiest of the two.

## 14

# Arnold, Archbishop of Cologne, to Hildegard

1150–56(?)

The archbishop of Cologne writes to ask Hildegard to send him a copy of the *Scivias*. Van Acker indicates some little latitude (1150–56) for the date of this letter, and even then with an additional question mark. If the requested book “which you wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit” is indeed—and there seems no reason to doubt that it is—the *Scivias* (“whether it is complete or not”), one would think that an earlier date (say, 1150–52) might be more appropriate, since the *Scivias* was finished in 1151.

Arnold, archbishop of Cologne by the grace of God, to Hildegard, a blazing lantern in the house of the Lord at Mount St. Rupert. May you forever remain in the protection of the God of Heaven.

If you are well, with all things around you being directed by the Lord, we rejoice. Thanks to your merits with the Lord, we also are well. We are, however, unable to visit you as we had planned some time ago. Nevertheless, we entrust ourselves to you as far as we can at the present time, putting our hands into yours, joining our faith to yours, completely commending ourselves to you.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to send, through the good offices of the present messenger, that book which you wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For whether it is complete or not, we are neither willing nor able to do without it—not because we wish to tempt God, but because we long to see His miracles.

## 14r

## Hildegard to Arnold, Archbishop of Cologne

1150–56(?)

Hildegard's response notifies the archbishop that she has sent her "book of truthful visions" out to him. Once again she affirms that nothing in the book is from her own will, but all from the Living Light. Then, oddly, she claims the same thing for the present letter, a curious remark indeed for a letter which merely indicates that she is fulfilling the interlocutor's request. There is, clearly, something amiss with the text as we have received it. The version in the *Patrologia* is much longer and does indeed report a vision in detail. But see Van Acker, *Der Briefwechsel* (1989), p. 140, for details.

Now then, O shepherd of your people, I—poor little woman that I am—sent my book of truthful visions to you, just as you requested. I remind you that it contains nothing originating from human wisdom nor from my own will, but rather it contains those truths which the unfailing Light wished to reveal through his own words. Indeed, this very letter which I am now writing to you came in a similar manner, not from my intellect nor through any human mediation, but through divine revelation.

## 15

## Dean Philip<sup>1</sup> and the Clerics of Cologne to Hildegard

1163(?)

Philip writes Hildegard to request a copy of the sermon she recently preached at Cologne.

Philip, unworthy dean, and the entire chapter of the cathedral of Cologne send greetings to that venerable partaker of the portion which Mary chose [cf. Luke 10.42], Hildegard of St. Rupert in Bingen, who, in the purity of her heart, gazes upon God in the present life, and, in the life to come, face to face [cf. I Cor 13.12].

Because we esteem your maternal piety, we want to inform you that after your recent visit to us at God's command when, through divine inspiration,

## 23

Hildegard to the prelates at  
Mainz<sup>1</sup>

1178–79

This is perhaps the most famous—certainly the most intriguing—of all Hildegard’s letters, because of her elaboration of the idea of music as a means of recapturing the original joy and beauty of paradise. Placed under interdict for her failure to obey the prelates of Mainz, Hildegard and her community felt the loss of music—specifically singled out by the interdict—most intensely, as one can see from what follows. In this letter, as Peter Dronke points out (*Women Writers*, p. 197), Hildegard “works out her own philosophy of music: music becomes not only the *musica mundana*, the cosmic harmony familiar from Boethius’s *De Musica*, but a way of understanding history—Adam and Lucifer, the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament Church—and a way in which human beings can still incarnate heavenly beauty in an earthly mode. The symbolism then turns into micro-cosmic allegory—music is the human body and soul, and the principles with which they are informed—an allegory that is dynamic and in no way forced, arising effortlessly out of Hildegard’s pattern of thoughts and images.” Despite the compelling argument that Hildegard makes, the prelates of Mainz paid absolutely no heed to this letter, and persisted inflexibly with the interdict.

By a vision, which was implanted in my soul by God the Great Artisan before I was born, I have been compelled to write these things because of the interdict by which our superiors have bound us, on account of a certain dead man buried at our monastery, a man buried without any objection, with his own priest officiating. Yet only a few days after his burial, these men ordered us to remove him from our cemetery. Seized by no small terror, as a result, I looked as usual to the True Light, and, with wakeful eyes, I saw in my spirit that if this man were disinterred in accordance with their commands, a terrible and lamentable danger would come upon us like a dark cloud before a threatening thunderstorm.<sup>a</sup>

Therefore, we have not presumed to remove the body of the deceased inasmuch as he had confessed his sins, had received extreme unction and communion, and had been buried without objection. Furthermore, we have not yielded to those who advised or even commanded this course of action. Not, certainly, that we take the counsel of upright men or the orders of our superiors lightly, but we would not have it appear that, out of feminine harshness<sup>2</sup> we did injustice to the sacraments of Christ, with which this man had been fortified while he was still alive. But so that we may not be totally disobedient we have, in accordance with their injunction, ceased from singing the divine praises and from participation in Mass, as had been our regular monthly custom.<sup>b</sup>

As a result, my sisters and I have been greatly distressed and saddened. Weighed down by this burden, therefore, I heard these words in a vision: It is improper for you to obey human words ordering you to abandon the sacraments of the Garment of the Word of God,<sup>c</sup> Who, born virginally of the Virgin Mary, is your salvation. Still, it is incumbent upon you to seek permission to participate in the sacraments from those prelates who laid the obligation of obedience upon you. For ever since Adam was driven from the bright region of paradise into the exile of this world on account of his disobedience, the conception of all people is justly tainted by that first transgression. Therefore, in accordance with God's inscrutable plan, it was necessary for a man free from all pollution to be born in human flesh, through whom<sup>d</sup> all who are predestined to life might be cleansed from corruption and might be sanctified by the communion of his body so that he might remain in them and they in him for their fortification. That person, however, who is disobedient to the commands of God, as Adam was, and is completely forgetful of Him must be completely cut off from participation in the sacrament of His body, just as he himself has turned away from Him in disobedience. And he must remain so until, purged through penitence, he is permitted by the authorities to receive the communion of the Lord's body again. In contrast, however, a person who is aware that he has incurred such a restriction not as a result of anything that he has done, either consciously or deliberately, may be present at the service of the life-giving sacrament, to be cleansed by the Lamb without sin, Who, in obedience to the Father, allowed Himself to be sacrificed on the altar of the cross that he might restore salvation to all.<sup>e</sup>

In that same vision I also heard that I had erred in not going humbly and devoutly to my superiors for permission to participate in the communion, especially since we were not at fault in receiving that dead man into our cemetery. For, after all, he had been fortified by his own priest with proper Christian procedure, and, without objection from anyone, was buried in our cemetery, with all Bingen joining in the funeral procession. And so God has commanded me to report these things to you, our lords and prelates. Further, I saw in my vision also that by obeying you we have been celebrating the divine office incorrectly, for from the time of your restriction up to the present, we have ceased to sing the divine office, merely reading it instead. And I heard a voice coming from the Living Light concerning the various kinds of praises, about which David speaks in the psalm: "Praise Him with sound of trumpet: praise Him with psaltery and harp," and so forth up to this point: "Let every spirit praise the Lord" [Ps 150.3, 6]. These words use outward, visible things to teach us about inward things. Thus the material composition and the quality of these instruments instruct us how we ought to give form to the praise of the Creator and turn all the convictions of our inner being to the same. When we consider these things carefully, we recall that man needed the voice of the living Spirit, but Adam lost this divine voice through disobedience. For while he was still innocent, before his transgression, his voice blended fully with the voices of the angels in their praise of God.<sup>f</sup> Angels are called spirits from that Spirit which is God, and thus they have such voices by virtue of their spiritual nature.



But Adam lost that angelic voice which he had in paradise, for he fell asleep to that knowledge which he possessed before his sin, just as a person on waking up only dimly remembers what he had seen in his dreams.<sup>a</sup> And so when he was deceived by the trick of the devil and rejected the will of his Creator, he became wrapped up in the darkness of inward ignorance as the just result of his iniquity.

God, however, restores the souls of the elect to that pristine blessedness by infusing them with the light of truth. And in accordance with His eternal plan, He so devised it that whenever He renews the hearts of many with the pouring out of the prophetic spirit, they might, by means of His interior illumination, regain some of the knowledge which Adam had before he was punished for his sin.<sup>b</sup>

And so the holy prophets, inspired by the Spirit which they had received, were called for this purpose: not only to compose psalms and canticles (by which the hearts of listeners would be inflamed) but also to construct various kinds of musical instruments to enhance these songs of praise with melodic strains. Thereby, both through the form and quality of the instruments, as well as through the meaning of the words which accompany them, those who hear might be taught, as we said above, about inward things, since they have been admonished and aroused by outward things. In such a way, these holy prophets get beyond the music of this exile and recall to mind that divine melody of praise which Adam, in company with the angels, enjoyed in God before his fall.

Men of zeal and wisdom have imitated the holy prophets and have themselves, with human skill, invented several kinds of musical instruments, so that they might be able to sing for the delight of their souls, and they accompanied their singing with instruments played with the flexing of the fingers, recalling, in this way, Adam, who was formed by God's finger, which is the Holy Spirit. For, before he sinned, his voice had the sweetness of all musical harmony. Indeed, if he had remained in his original state, the weakness of mortal man would not have been able to endure the power and the resonance of his voice.<sup>c</sup>

But when the devil, man's great deceiver, learned that man had begun to sing through God's inspiration and, therefore, was being transformed to bring back the sweetness of the songs of heaven, mankind's homeland, he was so terrified at seeing his clever machinations go to ruin that he was greatly tormented. Therefore, he devotes himself continually to thinking up and working out all kinds of wicked contrivances. Thus he never ceases from confounding confession and the sweet beauty of both divine praise and spiritual hymns, eradicating them through wicked suggestions, impure thoughts, or various distractions from the heart of man and even from the mouth of the Church itself, wherever he can, through dissension, scandal, or unjust oppression.

Therefore, you and all prelates must exercise the greatest vigilance to clear the air by full and thorough discussion of the justification for such actions before your verdict closes the mouth of any church singing praises to God or suspends it from handling or receiving the divine sacraments. And you must be especially certain that you are drawn to this action out of zeal for God's justice, rather than out of indignation, unjust emotions, or a desire for revenge,

and you must always be on your guard not to be circumvented in your decisions by Satan, who drove man from celestial harmony and the delights of paradise.

Consider, too, that just as the body of Jesus Christ was born of the purity of the Virgin Mary through the operation of the Holy Spirit so, too, the canticle of praise, reflecting celestial harmony, is rooted in the Church through the Holy Spirit. The body is the vestment of the spirit, which has a living voice, and so it is proper for the body, in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God. Whence, in metaphor, the prophetic spirit commands us to praise God with clashing cymbals and cymbals of jubilation [cf. Ps 150.5], as well as other musical instruments which men of wisdom and zeal have invented, because all arts pertaining to things useful and necessary for mankind have been created by the breath that God sent into man's body. For this reason it is proper that God be praised in all things.

And because sometimes a person sighs and groans at the sound of singing, remembering, as it were, the nature of celestial harmony, the prophet, aware that the soul is symphonic and thoughtfully reflecting on the profound nature of the spirit, urges us in the psalm [cf. Ps 32.2, 91.4] to confess to the Lord with the harp and to sing a psalm to Him with the ten-stringed psaltery. His meaning is that the harp, which is plucked from below, relates to the discipline of the body; the psaltery, which is plucked from above, pertains to the exertion of the spirit; the ten chords, to the fulfillment of the law.<sup>j</sup>

Therefore, those who, without just cause, impose silence on a church and prohibit the singing of God's praises and those who have on earth unjustly despoiled God of His honor and glory will lose their place among the chorus of angels, unless they have amended their lives through true penitence and humble restitution. Moreover, let those who hold the keys of heaven beware not to open those things which are to be kept closed nor to close those things which are to be kept open, for harsh judgment will fall upon those who rule, unless, as the apostle says [cf. Rom 12.8], they rule with good judgment.

And I heard a voice saying thus: Who created heaven? God. Who opens heaven to the faithful? God. Who is like Him? No one. And so, O men of faith, let none of you resist Him or oppose Him, lest He fall on you in His might and you have no helper to protect you from His judgment. This time is a womanish time,<sup>3</sup> because the dispensation of God's justice is weak. But the strength of God's justice is exerting itself, a female warrior battling against injustice, so that it might fall defeated.<sup>k</sup>

### Notes

1. In 1178 Hildegard had permitted the burial of a certain nobleman—whose name has not come down to us—in consecrated ground at Mount St. Rupert. This seemingly innocuous decision was to lead to the bitterest confrontation that Hildegard, now eighty years old, had ever faced in her long career. For the dead nobleman had once been excommunicated, and there remained some question of whether he had been absolved from that interdict. At least so alleged the prelates of Mainz, who ordered Hildegard, under pain of excommunication herself, to have the corpse exhumed and cast out of holy ground. The motives of the prelates, however, are suspect, especially on account of the haste with which they acted, while their archbishop was away in Rome serving as

be such that the gentle Father will rejoice over you, and his Word will enlighten your spirit, and the fiery Lover will shed the ointment of salvation and the invigoration of the flower of wisdom upon you.

*Altena*

49

## An Abbess to Hildegard

Before 1173

A very loving, intimate letter from an abbess to Hildegard.

To the lady and mother, Hildegard, beloved and venerable in Christ, intimate companion of His love, from “N,”<sup>1</sup> abbess of Altena, although unworthy, a sinner sitting penitent with Mary at the feet of Jesus, with the hope of seeing her beloved just as He is.

Most beloved of all women, I rejoice in your blessedness, for, as is shown by your very clear delight, you have found the One whom your soul loves as much as mortal can, and even now blissfully spending time with Him in the secret chamber of your heart, you have tasted and seen “that the Lord is sweet” [Ps 33.9].

It seems clear that I must accept with equanimity the fact that you have failed to visit me through your letters for a long time, although I am greatly devoted to you. For I believe that if, just for a second, you could turn the eye of your mind from gazing at your beloved and could set foot outside your peaceful dwelling, you would not fail to console me more frequently through your messenger, who would gladden me by informing me of your well-being, and would bear back news of me to you. For if it is not granted to me to see your beloved face again in this life—and I cannot even mention this without tears—I will always rejoice because of you, since I have determined to love you as my own soul. Therefore, I will see you in the eye of prayer, until we arrive at that place where we will be allowed to look upon each other eternally, and to contemplate our beloved, face to face [cf. I Cor 13.12], in all His glory.

### *Note*

1. The identity of this writer is unknown. Even the initial given, presumably that of the abbess’s name, varies in the MSS from *N* to *B* to *H*.

## 49r

## Hildegard to the Abbess

Before 1173

Hildegard's answer to the abbess is austere and brief, merely an explication of a biblical verse, a rather odd answer to such a tender, devoted letter.

O you who are a leader in the brilliant, springing waters of the fountain [cf. John 4.14], that is to say, as Christ's representative, hear these words: "Behold the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, hath prevailed" [Apoc 5.5]. The meaning of this is as follows: The Son, the brightness of holy divinity, is like a root. For He roars like a lion, when He hurls the followers of that first fallen angel into hell, so that, with mighty jaws, He casts down all injustice, and so He is the root of fortitude. But He draws to himself all those who confess Him in faith and reach out to Him with good works, and thus, like a lion, He prevails over all things. This is my admonition—heed it.

*Altwick*

## 50

## Abbess Sophia to Hildegard

1164–70

An abbess who wishes to lay aside the burden of administrative duties seeks Hildegard's advice about the advisability of such a course of action.

Sophia, abbess of Altwick in the diocese of Utrecht—abbess in name only—sends greetings to the blessed Hildegard of St. Rupert, with a prayer that she may enter that choir which is illumined by the light of lights.

Because no one is able to renounce the lust of the flesh and pant after the heavenly country with whole heart without Christ's help, I desire to impart to you, devout lady, the idea I have conceived in my heart by the prompting of God and the grace of his Spirit. Our Lord does not wish any of His sheep to go astray, but like a good shepherd desires to call them all back to the way of eternal salvation. This same Lord has inspired me, I believe, to lay down the heavy burden of administration which I bear, and to seek the seclusion of some little cell. I would be happy to follow this way of life, but whether I can successfully fulfill it or not lies in our Lord's power.

Therefore, because you have such merit in God's eyes, I know that you can discern a person's proper course of action through the revelation of the

## 49r

## Hildegard to the Abbess

Before 1173

Hildegard's answer to the abbess is austere and brief, merely an explication of a biblical verse, a rather odd answer to such a tender, devoted letter.

O you who are a leader in the brilliant, springing waters of the fountain [cf. John 4.14], that is to say, as Christ's representative, hear these words: "Behold the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, hath prevailed" [Apoc 5.5]. The meaning of this is as follows: The Son, the brightness of holy divinity, is like a root. For He roars like a lion, when He hurls the followers of that first fallen angel into hell, so that, with mighty jaws, He casts down all injustice, and so He is the root of fortitude. But He draws to himself all those who confess Him in faith and reach out to Him with good works, and thus, like a lion, He prevails over all things. This is my admonition—heed it.

*Altwick*

## 50

## Abbess Sophia to Hildegard

1164–70

An abbess who wishes to lay aside the burden of administrative duties seeks Hildegard's advice about the advisability of such a course of action.

Sophia, abbess of Altwick in the diocese of Utrecht—abbess in name only—sends greetings to the blessed Hildegard of St. Rupert, with a prayer that she may enter that choir which is illumined by the light of lights.

Because no one is able to renounce the lust of the flesh and pant after the heavenly country with whole heart without Christ's help, I desire to impart to you, devout lady, the idea I have conceived in my heart by the prompting of God and the grace of his Spirit. Our Lord does not wish any of His sheep to go astray, but like a good shepherd desires to call them all back to the way of eternal salvation. This same Lord has inspired me, I believe, to lay down the heavy burden of administration which I bear, and to seek the seclusion of some little cell. I would be happy to follow this way of life, but whether I can successfully fulfill it or not lies in our Lord's power.

Therefore, because you have such merit in God's eyes, I know that you can discern a person's proper course of action through the revelation of the

Holy Spirit, and so with humble prayers I beseech you, pious lady, to ask the Lord if my contemplated change pleases Him. For I do not want to be among those singled out by Gregory's famous dictum: "It would have been better for them never to have known the way of truth than to have fallen away once having known it."<sup>1</sup>

Finally, farewell in the Lord, and please do not fail to address these matters of concern to me, returning your answer by way of the present messenger, along with whatever else the grace of God is pleased to reveal to you through the Holy Spirit.

### Note

1. *Regula pastoralis* 3.34. Cf. 2 Peter 2.21.

## 50r

# Hildegard to the Abbess Sophia

1164–70

Hildegard advises against the abbess's plan and warns her against the dangers of instability.

In a true vision of the mysteries of God, hear these words: O daughter born from man's side and formed by God as the type of the building up of His kingdom, why are you languishing, so that your mind is like the shifting clouds that the storms blow about, at times bright in the sunlight, at times dark in the shadows. This is true because of the cacophony of the morals of those who do not shine before God.

You say, I long to rest, to seek out a nesting place for my heart, where my soul may find peace. But, O daughter, it is not serving God to cast off your burden and to abandon God's sheepfold, when you have that light through which you may illuminate it, so that you may lead the sheep to pasture. Now then, rein yourself in, lest your mind become inflamed with the sweetness which is very harmful to you in the instability of secular life. But be true to your calling, because this is what the grace of God wishes. Beware, therefore, lest you lose that grace through the instability of your mind. May God help you to stay alert through pure knowledge.

*Andernach*

## 52

## Mistress Tengswich to Hildegard

1148–50

This letter from the superior of a foundation of canonesses is quite remarkable for the heavy irony and innuendo that lies just beneath the surface of its all-too-polite exterior. Tengswich keeps assuring the reader that she is merely seeking the grounds—in Scripture or the patristic tradition—for certain of Hildegard's outlandish practices, but the hostile tone comes through quite clearly. For an illuminating discussion of the sharply contrasting views of the proper monastic life in the twelfth century as revealed by this correspondence between Hildegard and Tengswich, see Haverkamp, "Tenxwind."

To Hildegard, mistress of the brides of Christ, Tengswich, unworthy superior of the sisters at Andernach, with a prayer that she eventually be joined to the highest order of spirits in heaven.

The report of your saintliness has flown far and wide and has brought to our attention things wondrous and remarkable. And, insignificant as we are, these reports have highly commended the loftiness of your outstanding and extraordinary mode of religious life to us. We have learned from a number of people that an angel from above reveals many secrets of heaven for you to record, difficult as they are for mortal minds to grasp, as well as some things that you are to do, not in accordance with human wisdom, but as God himself instructs them to be done.<sup>a</sup>

We have, however, also heard about certain strange and irregular practices that you countenance. They say that on feast days your virgins stand in the church with unbound hair when singing the psalms and that as part of their dress they wear white, silk veils, so long that they touch the floor. Moreover, it is said that they wear crowns of gold filigree, into which are inserted crosses on both sides and the back, with a figure of the Lamb on the front, and that they adorn their fingers with golden rings.<sup>b</sup> And all this despite the express prohibition of the great shepherd of the Church, who writes in admonition: Let women comport themselves with modesty "not with plaited hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire" [I Tim 2.9]. Moreover, that which seems no less strange to us is the fact that you admit into your community only those women from noble, well-established families and absolutely reject others who are of lower birth and of less wealth.<sup>c</sup> Thus we are struck with wonder and are reeling in confusion when we ponder quietly in our heart that the Lord himself brought into the primitive Church humble fishermen and poor people, and that, later, at the conversion of the gentiles, the blessed Peter said: "In truth, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons" [Acts 10.34; cf. Rom 2.11]. Nor should you be unmindful of the words of the Apostle in Corinthians: "Not

many mighty, not many noble, but God hath chosen the contemptible and the ignoble things of this world” [I Cor 1.26–28]. We have examined as accurately as possible all the precedents laid down by the fathers of the Church, to which all spiritual people must conform, and we have found nothing in them comparable to your actions.

O worthy bride of Christ, such unheard-of practices far exceed the capacity of our weak understanding, and strike us with no little wonder. And although we feeble little women wholeheartedly rejoice with all the esteem due your spiritual success, we still wish you to inform us on some points relative to this matter. Therefore, we have decided to send this humble little letter to you, saintly lady, asking by whose authority you can defend such practices, and we devoutly and meekly beseech, worthy lady, that you not disdain to write back to us as soon as possible. Farewell, and remember us in your prayers.

## 52r

# Hildegard to the Congregation of Nuns

1148–50

Hildegard answers Tengswich’s criticism at length, especially concerning herself with the restrictions on dress (to which virgins are not subject) and with the criterion of nobility for entrance into her community (one does not plow with an ox and an ass). For illuminating discussions, see Haverkamp, “Tenxwind,” and Dronke, *Women Writers*, pp. 165–67.

The Living Fountain says: Let a woman remain within her chamber<sup>1</sup> so that she may preserve her modesty, for the serpent breathed the fiery danger of horrible lust into her. Why should she do this? Because the beauty of woman radiated and blazed forth in the primordial root, and in her was formed that chamber in which every creature lies hidden. Why is she so resplendent? For two reasons: on the one hand, because she was created by the finger of God and, on the other, because she was endowed with wondrous beauty. O, woman, what a splendid being you are! For you have set your foundation in the sun, and have conquered the world.<sup>a</sup>

Paul the apostle, who flew to the heights but kept silent on earth so as not to reveal that which was hidden [cf. II Cor 12.2ff.], observed that a woman who is subject to the power of her husband [cf. Ephes 5.22ff; Col 3.18], joined to him through the first rib, ought to preserve great modesty, by no means giving or displaying her vessel to another man who has no business with her, for that vessel belongs to her husband [cf. I Thess 4.4]. And let her do this in



accordance with the word spoken by the master of the earth in scorn of the devil: “What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder” [Matt 19.6].

Listen: The earth keeps the grass green and vital, until winter conquers it.<sup>2</sup> Then winter takes away the beauty of that flower, and the earth covers over its vital force so that it is unable to manifest itself as if it had never withered up, because winter has ravaged it. In a similar manner, a woman, once married, ought not to indulge herself in prideful adornment of hair or person, nor ought she to lift herself up to vanity, wearing a crown and other golden ornaments, except at her husband’s pleasure, and even then with moderation.<sup>b</sup>

But these strictures do not apply to a virgin, for she stands in the unsullied purity of paradise, lovely and unwithering, and she always remains in the full vitality of the budding rod.<sup>c</sup> A virgin is not commanded to cover up her hair,<sup>3</sup> but she willingly does so out of her great humility, for a person will naturally hide the beauty of her soul, lest, on account of her pride, the hawk carry it off.

Virgins are married with holiness in the Holy Spirit and in the bright dawn of virginity, and so it is proper that they come before the great High Priest as an oblation presented to God. Thus through the permission granted her and the revelation of the mystic inspiration of the finger of God, it is appropriate for a virgin to wear a white vestment, the lucent symbol of her betrothal to Christ, considering that her mind is made one with the interwoven whole, and keeping in mind the One to whom she is joined, as it is written: “Having his name, and the name of his Father, written on their foreheads” [Apoc 14.1] and also “These follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth” [Apoc 14.4].

God also keeps a watchful eye on every person, so that a lower order will not gain ascendancy over a higher one, as Satan and the first man did, who wanted to fly higher than they had been placed. And who would gather all his livestock indiscriminately into one barn—the cattle, the asses, the sheep, the kids? Thus it is clear that differentiation must be maintained in these matters, lest people of varying status, herded all together, be dispersed through the pride of their elevation, on the one hand, or the disgrace of their decline, on the other, and especially lest the nobility of their character be torn asunder when they slaughter one another out of hatred. Such destruction naturally results when the higher order falls upon the lower, and the lower rises above the higher. For God establishes ranks on earth, just as in heaven<sup>d</sup> with angels, archangels, thrones, dominions, cherubim, and seraphim. And they are all loved by God, although they are not equal in rank. Pride loves princes and nobles because of their illusions of grandeur, but hates them when they destroy that illusion. And it is written that “God does not cast off the mighty, since He himself is mighty” [Job 36.5]. He does not love people for their rank but for their works which derive their savor from Him, just as the Son of God says: “My food is to do the will” of my Father [John 4.34]. Where humility is found, there Christ always prepares a banquet. Thus when individuals seek after empty honor rather than humility, because they believe that one is preferable to the other, it is necessary that they be assigned to their proper place. Let the sick sheep be cast out of the fold, lest it infect the entire flock.<sup>4</sup>

God has infused human beings with good understanding so that their name will not be destroyed. It is not good for people to grab hold of a mountain

which they cannot possibly move. Rather, they should stand in the valley, gradually learning what they are capable of.

These words do not come from a human being but from the Living Light.<sup>e</sup> Let the one who hears see and believe where these words come from.

### Notes

1. Note the repeated use of the word *chamber* here, and see Introduction for remarks on Hildegard's wordplay.

2. This passage, which, one might note, is nothing if not Hildegardian, does not readily lend itself to translation. A literal rendering would give something like: "The earth sweats forth [*sudat*] the vital force [*viriditatem*] of the grass."

3. Literally, the *viriditas* of her hair. Hildegard deliberately echoes the passage above about the earth and grass ("The earth sweats forth the vital force [*viriditatem graminis*] of the grass"), for the hair in the little world of man has its counterpart in the grass of the macrocosmic universe. See *Causae et curae* 8a–8b: "For the firmament of heaven is like the head of a human being; the sun, the moon, and the stars are the eyes; the air is the auditory sense; the wind, the olfactory sense; dew is taste; the sides of the world are the arms and the sense of touch; other creatures in the world are the belly; and the earth is the heart . . ." As edited by P. Dronke, *Women Writers*, p. 242.

4. Cf. *Regula Sancti Benedicti* 28.8. It should perhaps be noted also that Hildegard wrote a commentary on the *Rule*.

## Augsburg 53

# Canon Udalric to Hildegard

Before 1170

A letter from a very humble canon, reminding Hildegard of the time when he came to see her, and beseeching her prayers.

To the Lady Hildegard, steeped in religious discipline, wisdom, good morals, and in every human virtue, from Udalric, her servant in all things, with prayers that she labor with Martha in the sixth hour, be renewed in the seventh, and rejoice with Mary in the eighth [cf. Luke 10.38ff].

How I could have withdrawn myself, beloved lady, for so long a time from your sight and your sweet conversation, more delightful to me indeed than honey, or why I have postponed visiting you in the meantime even with a short letter, I am completely unable to understand, though I must attribute it all, I suppose, to the sloth that results from my insignificance. I am terrified of offending you, pious lady, with such a lack of grace—God forbid!—and rightly so since earlier, though I was yet unknown to you in voice, dress, face, or even reputation, you welcomed me very graciously and kindly when I first came to you (a difficult task for me, to be sure), and immediately deigned to refresh me

by allowing me to partake in conversation with you—something which I consider a very great favor.

But because I am penitent, you will forgive me. For my mind has never been unwilling, but the ability was lacking. Therefore, if I am able to make a true promise, I vow to change my ways as quickly as possible, if God grants me the means. In the meantime, however, please deign to be mindful of me, a poor sinner, in your prayers before God.

## 53r

# Hildegard to Canon Udalric

Before 1170

Hildegard writes very general reflections back to the canon.

He who is life has revealed these words to me, saying: O man, you are like the water which the storm makes turbulent, but which then settles down tranquilly. Victory says to you: I would gladly come to you, but you withdraw from me when you hide the face of your mind and thus are filled with doubt, having neither the soaring wings of security nor contempt for the world.

O knight, resurrection will come to you quickly if you will shake off the dust of your ashes, saying: If I cannot stand in the sun, at least I will drag myself out of the mud and wash my garments clean of the unstable morals of this age. Then the dove will anoint you and will wash your wounds. Arise now, and live forever.

## *Averbode*

## 54

# Hildegard to Provost Andrew

Before 1166

A letter of general admonition and criticism, ending on a note of hope.

The Secret Light says: You are terrified as if by the wind, and the green tree of your mind is dormant.<sup>1</sup> But one who has vitality in his inner heart builds on the height of the wall. Yet a shepherd who feeds his flock but who still lacks the inner fortitude to come to its aid in peril and indeed runs away weary of his duty [cf. John 10.12f]—that one is not suited for pastoral office. Therefore, let him act the sheep, and not the shepherd.

You, O man, are like someone struggling in the water, scarcely able to

rescue himself before he drowns. Thus although you see prudence all around you, you lack strength—but not will, and, therefore, the grace of God shines for you.

### Note

1. Hildegard's phrase is *in ligno viriditatis mentis tue*, literally "in the wood of the viridity of your mind." *Viridity* appears again in the very next sentence, where we translate "vitality."

## 55

# An Abbot to Hildegard

Before 1166

This letter asking for Hildegard's prayers certainly attests to Hildegard's high reputation. Is this from a Cistercian monastery in Averbode? The writer has clearly been influenced in his choice of language and style by St. Bernard.

N.,<sup>1</sup> humble and unworthy superior of the brothers in Averbode, sends greetings to Hildegard of Bingen, the glorious handmaiden of Christ, who has been crowned with the flowers of holy virtue, with a prayer that she may be rewarded with the penny of the gospel's day laborer [cf. Matt 20.2] because of her zeal for the life of purity.

I will not cease pouring out my great thanks to God, who has set the loftiness of your person like a brilliantly blazing lamp, not under a bushel, but on a candlestick [cf. Matt 5.15; Luke 8.16, 11.33]. For He has not left off watching over and consoling you, reverend and saintly lady, with the visitation of his angels and the grace of his spirit. And He has diffused your good name far and wide like a delicious fragrance, not only throughout Germany but also in our region and other parts of the world, so that you may justly say with the Apostle: "We are the good odour of Christ unto God in" every place [II Cor 2.15].

And rejoicing because you have advanced far in faith, we are compelled to say: How beautiful you have become in delights, daughter of the prince; We will be glad and rejoice in thee, remembering thy breasts more than wine [cf. Cant 7.1ff; 1.3]. For in them, we, weak though we are, have put our weakness to flight, and each of us, having become strong and robust according to the wisdom God has given to you, takes solid food [cf. I Cor 3.1–2; Heb 5.12ff], and is able to say without fear of censure: Thy "lips distill choice myrrh" [Cant 5.13] and "thy lips are like a dripping honeycomb" [Cant 4.11], O beloved bride of God. For like a city set on a mountain [cf. Matt 5.14] of virtues, you cannot be concealed, because the Lord has established you as an unmovable

and unshaken column in the middle of his Church, so that among the lamentable crises of this world, his people, redeemed with the price of his blood, may learn through you what they ought to seek and what they ought to avoid. And instructed by the example of your great virtue, they may advance day by day and ascend vigorously from virtue unto virtue to see the God of gods on Zion [cf. Ps 83.8].

Confident, therefore, in the protection of your prayers, although I am not worthy to receive the crown for my labors, may I be granted at least to escape punishment. I commend myself wholeheartedly to your prayers, because I have often offended God by my great sins. Farewell, beloved lady, and pray to the Lord for me, unworthy though I am, and call upon Him with the words God himself gives you.

#### Note

1. N. has not been identified, although his monastery, as the first sentence of the letter makes clear, was in Averbode in Brabant.

## 55r

# Hildegard to the Abbot

Before 1166

This answer directed against malicious gossip seems a little beside the point of the letter sent to Hildegard. Is this one of those instances where the messenger delivered additional information?

The spears of malicious words hurled by the faithless and the slanderous are like a dangerous wind, suddenly assailing a person's heart. And this is the storm aroused by the first angel when he despised God. As I frequently observe, these onslaughts often afflict even a person in felicity whom God cherishes highly, because the Enemy has learned of his bliss and seeks to oppress him with that storm so that he, too, may fall. But he is not powerful enough to snatch him from God's bosom. Although difficulties and tribulations from the elements befall him, he retains his self-restraint, because God is watching over him. Yet just as the Church received a new birth in the blood of Christ, so it was proper and fitting that water, the dowry of the Holy Spirit [cf. John 3.5], be mingled with the blood of Christ, because the blood of every human being is tainted.<sup>1</sup>

#### Note

1. Some MSS give the following addition to the letter: "But, O head of the household on Mt. Zion, I admonish you to become a trumpet sounding aloud among the

## 60

## An Abbot to Hildegard

1158–61(?)

The abbot of St. Michael in Bamberg requests the prayers of Hildegard.

To the Lady Hildegard, the betrothed of the High King, and mistress of the sisters of St. Rupert, B., unworthy abbot of St. Michael in Bamberg, sends whatever he can in the way of prayer and devotion.

We hear that you are aflame with love for the One who has redeemed us with his own blood, and, to the best of our ability, we earnestly beseech Him to preserve eternally the gifts He has bestowed upon you. With our whole heart we long for your presence, but because we have been ensnared by our own sins, we have been unable to gain our desire. In the name of the One you love, sweet lady, I beseech you as earnestly as I can to implore the Lord to be merciful to me, and that you pray Him to temper the lash of His mercy, with which He has scourged me, and scourges me daily. Thus may I find salvation in this world, and compassion and grace in the world to come.

But if, as I hope, divine predestination has determined to call me forth from this darkness soon, I wish to commend my soul to your hands and prayers. Please send a letter of consolation to us by the present messenger.

*Bamberg (St. Theodore and St. Maria)*

## 61

## An Abbess to Hildegard

After 1157

The abbess requests to be received into Hildegard's community. Here is another instance of an administrator who wishes to be relieved of her responsibilities, this time, apparently, in order to join Hildegard's own community. Hildegard's answer is predictable.

To the beloved lady and mother, Hildegard, worthy of respect for her piety and dignity, L., abbess in name only in Bamberg, although unworthy, along with all the sisters entrusted to her by God, sends whatever the devout and frequent prayers of the humble can accomplish.

With all our hearts, we rejoice in Christ, blessed lady, that the Lord, who foreknew you and made you His elect, has illuminated you and filled you with the spirit of prophecy in our time. Christ has gladdened us especially in this:

that He not only foresaw and predestined you, a woman, for this purpose, but also His grace has illumined many through your teaching. Therefore, we offer the most devout thanks to Him for you, and we humbly pray that He mercifully finish that which He began in you, until He brings you to eternal life.

Therefore, we earnestly beseech you to consider receiving us into your fellowship, commending us heartily to your holy community. Please strengthen us with letters of encouragement. Farewell, beloved lady.

## 61r

# Hildegard to the Abbess

After 1157

Hildegard urges the abbess to remain in her administrative position, and impose obedience upon her subordinates.

O mother, a person who does not till a fertile field and make it fruitful is letting it run to seed, because he is not working for the good of the master. Who appointed the ox and the ass to their proper functions? God, of course, created them to serve mankind. Why then should a person not toil to fulfill his proper, useful function, since he is God's own work, and God did not establish him as a useless being? For God made man like the firmament, which bears the sun and the moon and the stars so that they may give light to all creation, and mark the times and the seasons. But if a black cloud should obscure all these things, creation would fear that its end is near.

O daughter of God, be aware that you are this field, because you hold the people in the embrace of your good will, and thus they can accept your words and works.<sup>a</sup> Therefore, do not refuse to toil with the people, and do not abandon them merely because you long for leisure, for frequently harmful weeds grow in idleness. Set before yourself the vision of the firmament, lest, deceived by the devil, you obscure the light of your reason with a black cloud of sin, as if you were scarcely alive. Therefore, use discipline to keep your daughters in check, for just as a child fears to be beaten with a rod, so also the master must be feared by everyone. Do not be afraid to punish them, but rather through your will to order increase your reward in the life everlasting, so that the breath of the Holy Spirit may flow into you.

## 62

Gertrude,<sup>1</sup> a Nun, to Hildegard

After 1161

This Gertrude is Gertrude von Stahleck, former countess. See Letter 30. A tender letter expressing her love for Hildegard and her longing to see her.

To Hildegard, her beloved mother in Christ, from her own Gertrude, with sincere prayers that God grant you what “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man” [I Cor 2.9].

I have absolutely no idea what I should write or say to you, for there is no one like you nor anyone so beloved in Christ, and indeed the very strength of my love has destroyed my ability to speak. Indeed, I have become drunk on the wine of the sorrow of your absence, blessed lady, and this has afflicted me so grievously that I have lost all desire to speak or even to see. I could almost believe that it would have been better for me never to have seen you at all, never to have known your kindness and maternal feeling toward me, for now separated from you by so great a distance, I grieve over you without ceasing as if you were lost to me forever.

But I hope in my God—*mine* I say, because I hold nothing dearer than Him—that He will not allow me to lay aside this besmirched body of mine until He has granted me the happiness of seeing you once again and enjoying conversation with you face to face. But if this cannot be because of the weight of my sins, He will not fail (I am assured by His goodness) to fulfill my hope of seeing you there where we will never be separated from His sight.

What more can I say? I ask you, beloved mother, to please pray for me to Him, in whose embrace you remain secure and in whose shadow you rest, like a young hart, from the heat of temptation and sin. Pray that He reveal himself to me, as I wander in search of Him, but, alas, without success. May He grant me to sit forever in the shadow of the one I desire [cf. Cant 2.3]. Farewell.

*Note*

1. See Letter 30, Headnote. Also see Van Acker, “Der Briefwechsel der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen,” *Revue bénédictine* 98 (1988), 148ff.



## 62r

## Hildegard to the Nun Gertrude

After 1161

Hildegard rejoices with Gertrude over her religious calling, for she is like the turtledove which remains alone once it has lost its mate.

O daughter of God, in pure knowledge of faith, hear the words directed to you: “The voice of the turtledove is heard in our land” [Cant 2.12]. This passage speaks of the Son of God, who, contrary to the law of nature, was born of the untilled earth of the flesh of the Virgin Mary. At that time, the flowers of all the virtues burgeoned forth in all their colorful glory, sweet with the fragrance of virtues. The garden of these virtues sprang up in the prodigal son, for when he came to his senses he ran to his father, that is, to the almighty Father, to confess his sins, and the father received him with the kiss of the humanity<sup>1</sup> of his Son.

The voice of the turtle dove is heard when, of our own free will, we give up the world for the love of God, for more than any other bird the turtle dove remains alone after it has lost its mate.<sup>2</sup> This is what you did, O beloved daughter, when you gave up the pomp of this world. O how beautiful were your shoes, O daughter of the king [cf. Cant 7.1], when, for the love of God, you entered the strait and narrow way of spiritual life. Therefore, rejoice, O daughter of Zion [cf. Zach 2.10], because the Holy Spirit dwells at the center of your heart. Reflect that your consoler set you “as a lily among thorns” [Cant 2.2] when you chose the spiritual life, although you possessed the pomp and riches of this world, which the Son of God called thorns. And in your passion at your entry into the order, you glowed like the rosebush of Jericho [cf. Eccles 24.18].

Now, I rejoice over you, for all the things which I have heard and desired have been fulfilled in you. So, you should rejoice with me, too. I hope with true faith that you will be a wall adorned with precious stones and pearls in the sight of God, and that you will be praised by all the heavenly host. Therefore, rejoice and be glad [cf. Lam 4.21] in your God, because you will live forever.

## Notes

1. Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux on the opening words of Canticles (“Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth”) in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*: “Take note: The Word becoming incarnate is the mouth which gives the kiss, and it is the flesh assumed which receives it. The kiss itself, brought to perfection equally by Him who gives and Him who receives, is that very Person, compact of each nature, the Mediator between God and men, that is, the man Christ Jesus” (II.3).

2. The turtle dove of the bestiaries.

## 63

Hildegard to the Congregation  
of Nuns

1157–70

A general letter of spiritual encouragement.

God had foreknowledge not only of good and evil, but also of disobedience. He perfected the good, crushed the evil, and rebuked disobedience. But may God bless you with every blessing, for you have trampled secular pomp under foot. Yet avoid the sin of being unmindful of God. But let that summer be in you which causes the roses and lilies and other spices<sup>1</sup> of the Holy Spirit to grow, so that foul weeds may not spring up in you, those perverse morals which permit pride and vanity to flourish.

Now, however, remain in that embrace which goes from virtue to virtue [cf. Ps 83.8], so that when you knock at the bridegroom's door [cf. Luke 12.36], He will receive you joyfully.

*Note*

1. Cf. *Scivias* III.x.309: "I will plant roses and lilies and fine spices of virtues in that field, and I will constantly water it with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and, rooting out harmful weeds, I will cut off the evil in it."

*Bassum*

## 64

## Hildegard to Abbess Richardis

1151–52

Hildegard writes to her favorite nun and cherished friend, who has deserted her. See Letter 4, Headnote and, especially, Letter 12, Headnote. For a sensitive and insightful discussion of this letter, see P. Dronke, *Women Writers*, pp. 157–58.

Daughter, listen to me, your mother, speaking to you in the spirit: my grief flies up to heaven. My sorrow is destroying the great confidence and consolation that I once had in mankind. From now on I will say: "It is good to trust in the Lord, rather than to trust in princes" [Ps 117.9]. The point of this Scripture is that a person ought to look to the living height, with vision unob-

*Bonn*

66

## A Certain Superior to Hildegard

Before 1173

A brief general letter reciting the writer's praise and love for Hildegard.

H., superior in Bonn, though unworthy, offers his service and complete devotion to Hildegard, the bride of Christ and most worthy mistress of the sisters of St. Rupert in Bingen.

If the Lord (who alone is mighty, good, faithful, and merciful) deigns to incline the ear of His majesty to the voice of any sinner, as I firmly believe, then His ear will resound with the tireless cries of my mouth and heart in praise of you. For, truly, I bear witness that there are no secrets before God: Ever since I first heard of your goodness, through the reports that reached us, and which I myself afterward discovered to be true, I have felt the most profound esteem for you. Ever since then, I have made you a full participant of everything I have said well or done well. Therefore, I hope for the same treatment from you; indeed I require it as if in payment of a debt, though more out of your goodness and your love for God.

Finally, neither fire nor sword nor flood nor the menace of any fear or danger, not even death itself can threaten the genuine love of my soul for you, or remove it in any way. Farewell.

66r

## Hildegard to the Superior

Before 1173

A letter of admonition to the superior, who, as Hildegard remarks, is only limping along in good works.

O man, you who love the world and are secular in your disposition, you are like a storm in your moral character, which is seldom calm but rarely dangerous.

That is to say, you frequently refuse consolation in your daily life, and in all your affairs you are oppressed, sometimes by weariness, sometimes by sorrow, sometimes by doubt. Therefore, rise up and call on the God of Israel, saying: "Prove me, O Lord, and try me; burn my reins and my heart" [Ps 25.2].

*Bonn*

66

## A Certain Superior to Hildegard

Before 1173

A brief general letter reciting the writer's praise and love for Hildegard.

H., superior in Bonn, though unworthy, offers his service and complete devotion to Hildegard, the bride of Christ and most worthy mistress of the sisters of St. Rupert in Bingen.

If the Lord (who alone is mighty, good, faithful, and merciful) deigns to incline the ear of His majesty to the voice of any sinner, as I firmly believe, then His ear will resound with the tireless cries of my mouth and heart in praise of you. For, truly, I bear witness that there are no secrets before God: Ever since I first heard of your goodness, through the reports that reached us, and which I myself afterward discovered to be true, I have felt the most profound esteem for you. Ever since then, I have made you a full participant of everything I have said well or done well. Therefore, I hope for the same treatment from you; indeed I require it as if in payment of a debt, though more out of your goodness and your love for God.

Finally, neither fire nor sword nor flood nor the menace of any fear or danger, not even death itself can threaten the genuine love of my soul for you, or remove it in any way. Farewell.

66r

## Hildegard to the Superior

Before 1173

A letter of admonition to the superior, who, as Hildegard remarks, is only limping along in good works.

O man, you who love the world and are secular in your disposition, you are like a storm in your moral character, which is seldom calm but rarely dangerous.

That is to say, you frequently refuse consolation in your daily life, and in all your affairs you are oppressed, sometimes by weariness, sometimes by sorrow, sometimes by doubt. Therefore, rise up and call on the God of Israel, saying: "Prove me, O Lord, and try me; burn my reins and my heart" [Ps 25.2].

and messengers. Now, however, we pursue the matter through the person of that same woman, for we have sent her to you with great hope, and we devoutly add prayer to prayer that the closer she is to you in body, the more propitious you will be to her in spirit.

For conjured in accordance with the letter you sent us through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the demon abandoned the vessel he had possessed—but only for a brief time. Alas, he has returned, we know not through what judgment of God, and he has invaded that abandoned vessel again and now oppresses her more grievously than ever before [cf. Matt 12.43ff].<sup>1</sup> Then, when we conjured him again, mightily assailing him, at length he answered that he would not abandon his possessed vessel unless you were present in person.<sup>2</sup> We are informing you of this for her sake, saintly lady, so that the Lord may accomplish what we, because of our sins, have not merited, and so that He Who rules over all may be glorified in you when the ancient enemy has been cast out. Farewell, beloved mother.

### Notes

1. The scene at the departure of the demon is described in meticulous detail in the *Vita* (III.ii.48): “That vile spirit howled and wailed so horribly that he struck great fear into all those present. Then, finally, in accordance with God’s will, after he had raged so violently for about half an hour, he abandoned the vessel he had long possessed.” Later, on being asked how he dared to return to the creature of God, the demon answered, “I fled terrified at the sign of the crucifix. But when I did not know where to go, I returned to my empty vessel since it had not been sealed [*signatum*].”

2. Once again the *Vita* (III.ii.49) gives the scene: “And when we conjured him once more in accordance with the instructions of that pious virgin, he cried out, with gnashing of teeth, that he would go out only in the presence of that old woman.”

## *Burgundy (Bellevaux, Cherlieu, Clairefontaine, La Charité, Bethany)*

### 70

## Five Abbots to Hildegard

Before 1157

The bearer of this letter is a woman that the abbots have sent with the request that, through Hildegard’s prayers and sanctity, she might be made fertile again.

B. of Bellevaux, G. of Cherlieu, A. of Clairefontaine, R. of La-Charité, and G. of Bethany,<sup>1</sup> abbots in name only, to Hildegard, the foreordained bride of Christ, with a prayer that she flourish in grace and join the canticle of praise [cf. Ecclus 39.19].

In the joy of our hearts we have rendered thanks to God, Who bestows every spiritual gift, and Who does not disdain to repeat the miracles of old in our time. Therefore, we readily assert that we have not been cheated at all of those promises with which He once comforted his followers when He said: “And behold I am with you even to the consummation of the world” [Matt 28.20]. Although we ourselves may be found unworthy of those promises, we are nevertheless aware that your heart has been greatly inspired by them through the aid of the Holy Spirit. Thus although you are inexperienced at composing books and doing many other unheard-of things to the amazement of those who witness them, still, through you, celestial harmony resounds wondrously, and things previously unknown to mortal man are revealed.<sup>a</sup>

And is it any wonder? Now, I say, even now, you are truly the unstained bride of Christ, leaning upon your beloved [cf. Cant 8.5]; His left hand is under your head, and His right embraces you [cf. Cant 2.6, 8.3]. He has brought you into His chamber and has graciously revealed his secrets to you [cf. Cant 2.6, 3.4, 8.3ff]. It is our hope that the Lord strengthen you in these mysteries, and we humbly beseech you to pray for some revelation concerning our condition, so that you may make it known to us.

The woman who brings this letter to you is a noble lady, the wife of a man who loves her very much. With great devotion she comes to you, humble and afoot, although she could have come on horseback with a large company. And she has come to you for the following reason: although she bore children early in her marriage, for a long time now she has been sterile. Those first children have died, and she has been able to bear no others, for which she and her husband are consumed with grief. That is the reason she has flown to you, the handmaiden and friend of Christ, in the firm belief that through your merits with God, and your prayers, she may become fertile and, having borne a child, present the blessed fruit of her womb to Christ. Therefore, because we have been petitioned by both her and her husband, we ask that you stand in prayer for them before God. May God grant them the desire of their hearts.

### Note

1. Van Acker, “Der Briefwechsel” (1989), identifies four of these as Burchard of Bellevaux, Guido of Cherlieu, Aliprand of Clairfontaine, and Guillelmus of Bethany. These are all Cistercian monasteries.

## 70r

# Hildegard to the Five Abbots

Before 1157

Hildegard replies to the abbots with a mini-sermon on penitence and mercy. Then at the end of the letter she addresses the subject of the infertile woman,

pointing out that such matters are in the hands of God, though she will indeed pray for her.

O you who by the grace of God have been called by the Lord to pastoral office, reflect upon God's first calling to Adam, when He said "Where art thou?" [Gen 3.9] when he went astray through disobedience.<sup>1</sup> Then his name was like the darkened earth, and God gave him a garment, knowing that He himself would eventually put on the robe of humanity on account of him—and for his sake.<sup>a</sup> And it was in this robe that He called him back again with the clear voice of mercy, when the prodigal son came to himself, saying: "How many hired servants in my father's house abound with bread, and here I perish with hunger" [Luke 15.17], and his father received him joyfully.

Now, it is fitting that you abbots understand clearly that God called Adam back by another way, that is, through the kiss of humanity shown in the fatted calf, saying: Through disobedience man had perished, but through penitence I will bring him back.

Climb up the high mountain, but build your tabernacles in the valley,<sup>2</sup> and stay in them for a long time. For when you look up to seek God, you are climbing the mountain. Then you may reflect on profound humility, for the Son of God became totally human in his humanity. Thus in all your works—that is to say, in yourselves and in others—observe humility, and persevere in it always.

Beware lest your mind be like a mountain blackened by the fires of the smithies where bronze is made. Here, filthy morals become a matter of bad habit, sometimes by thinking unwholesome things, sometimes by coveting them, sometimes by actually doing them, those things which do not move one to holiness but indeed inflict the wound of licentiousness. O knights of God, flee from those things and look to that light which you have tasted a little and rise quickly to sanctity, because you do not know when your end will come.

God endowed man with reason. For man is rational through God's word, whereas a non-rational creature is like a mere sound. Thus God established it that man embodies all creation.<sup>b</sup> But He gave two wings to reason: the right wing signifies good knowledge; the left, bad. And man, with these two wings, is like a bird. Man also is like the day and the night. For when day overcomes night in a person, he is called a good knight, because he conquers evil with military might. Therefore, O sons of God, serve in Christ's army day after day, and in tranquility of mind flee the cloud that overshadows the day. Moreover, turn away from nocturnal treachery, which willfully and arrogantly exhorts one to excess, but be the day which is cool and dewy in the early morning but later becomes more moderate in temperature, so that with discernment you may judge all things, and provide all good things in moderation for yourselves and others.

Therefore, dwell in the dovecotes [cf. Cant 2.14, Jer 48.28] with pure simplicity, so that you may have the "voice of rejoicing and of salvation in the tabernacles of the just" [Ps 117.15]. For God has implanted the living voice of the breath of life in reason, that is, the voice of rejoicing, which by good knowl-

## 72r

## Hildegard to the Abbot

About 1150(?)

Hildegard addresses the troubles in the abbot's monastery, which, as she says, are like a hurricane, shaking it to the foundation. A part of the problem she locates in the abbot himself. But God will preserve the monastery for the sake of a few good souls within the community.

In the vision by which my spirit is frequently enlightened while I myself remain fully awake, I see a whirlwind in your monastery, a hurricane, as it were, filled with lightning, all black and murky, and the monastery itself is shaken to the foundations. But I see three colors in your soul: first of all, the blackness of malice and wrath; second, the smoke of the appetite for perverse things; third, the red dawn of good will and the sigh breathed to God. But I also see a glorious light rising to God from some of your congregation, and for their sake God sustains the whole place through His grace.

You, however, O worthy shepherd, look to that field which has been blessed by God with fruitfulness. Over this field a dark storm cloud comes, wounding the field and damaging the fruit. I speak of the lethargy and the malice in the heart of one who knows the good and is able to bring it to pass, but who prefers to dwell in lethargy and malice, and is thus prevented from good works.

Son of God, flee from these things, and, inspired by the fire of the Holy Spirit, work in the fruitful field, before that day comes when you can work no longer.

*Clusin (St. George)*

## 73

Hildegard to the Congregation  
of Nuns

1161–63(?)

This letter is apparently not in answer to one sent to Hildegard, but was provoked by her concern for this community of nuns. She writes that she was commanded by God to admonish and correct the nuns.



Lord, you may overcome all these things. And you will not be wounded, but will live forever.

*Note*

1. That is, other administrators. See Letter 144r, n. 1. Hildegard's point here seems to be, as throughout the letter, that an administrator should govern with discernment and with mercy.

*Cologne (St. Agatha?)/Bonn*

156

## An Abbess to Hildegard

1163(?)–73

The abbess beseeches Hildegard to send her the advice and admonition that she sees in her visions. She also reminds Hildegard of the letter she had promised on her recent visit to her community.

To Hildegard, mistress of St. Rupert, illumined by the grace of the divine light, N., abbess (although unworthy) of Didenkirch near Bonn. Insignificant and unworthy though I am, I send an earnest request for prayer, along with the perseverance of service owed to you, great and worthy lady.

Trusting in your great sanctity and humility, I have sent this messenger to you with a letter, in the hope, holy lady, that if it does not offend your eyes, you will send me a brief response with some words of admonition, loving mother, to edify my spirit and bring confidence in God to me. Indeed, when you were here with us, you promised that, when you could find the time, you would write to offer me support and strength.

Moreover (if I dare to ask more), I will employ the prayers of the Canaanite woman who in the Gospel responded to the Lord by saying, "the whelps also eat of the crumbs that fall from the table of their masters" [Matt 15.27]. With that same devoted faith, therefore, I ask you to set before me briefly some of those crumbs from your table, that is to say, from that vision in which you often see many miracles, for I greatly desire them.

Indeed, as you will recall, I recently sent you the parchment to be used for this very purpose.<sup>a</sup>

To our utmost ability, we implore that God, by His everlasting goodness freely given, complete the good that He began in you [cf. Phil 1.6].

156r

## Hildegard to the Abbess

1163(?)–73

Hildegard advises the abbess to use moderation in her administrative duties, and, by use of a parable, teaches her to set an example of labor for her subordinates.

Your mind is unsettled because of muddy places and because of anxiety over many waters that run dry. “Muddy places” means those who are unstable in character, and “waters that run dry” means those who are hard and rocky in disposition, and who are not softened by the streams of doctrine flowing from the Holy Scripture. But you say in your heart, “Who, or what, am I? How can I endure such things?”

Listen now to a wise man’s parable: A certain man wanted to dig a cave, but while he was working with wood and iron, fire burst forth from a rock he had dug into. And the result was that this place could in no way be penetrated. Nevertheless, he took note of the location of the place, and with great exertion he dug other tunnels into it. And then the man said in his heart: “I have toiled strenuously, but he who comes after me will have easier labor, because he will find everything already prepared for him.” Surely, this man will be praised by his lord, because in length and breadth his work is much more useful than work done in arable land that is turned by the plow. And so his master will consider him a mighty knight competent to be in charge of his army, and so he puts him in charge of the other farmers who present him fruit in their due season. For whoever has labored first is preeminent over the one who succeeds him. Indeed, the Maker of the world undertook creation first, and thus set the example for His servants to labor after His fashion.

O daughter of God, keep a close watch over the plot of land within you so that it will not wither, deprived of fruitful utility for your children. Also, be firm of purpose, and avoid the intemperance of unsettled morals, for otherwise you will cause your daughters to flee from you. Be like fertile earth that is watered often with seasonable rain, so that you may produce good and delectable herbs. How can you do this? When a person feeds his flesh moderately, he has a mild and gentle character, but when he lives on an overabundance of food and high living, he causes all kinds of noxious vices to sprout in himself. On the other hand, a person who afflicts his body with immoderate abstinence always walks in anger. In all these matters, be fertile soil so that you may console your daughters when they weep, and reproach them when they rise up in wrath. And when they become savage, you may lead them to submit to the discipline of the Rule. Moreover, summon into your presence, and the presence of two others, those who have thoughtlessly turned away from you, and call them back with lessons drawn from history and lessons from the Gospel. And then if they still are disobedient

# The Letters

*Ellwangen*

91

## Abbot Adelbert to Hildegard

Before 1170

In this brief letter of high praise for Hildegard, Adelbert asks the seer to consult the divine oracle for assistance with his problems, for, as he notes in very general terms, he is surrounded on every side by enemies. Adelbert is apparently fearful of committing specifics to written form, for he indicates that the messenger will supply further information.

Adelbert, abbot (unworthy though I am) of Ellwangen, to Hildegard, beloved bride of Christ, with a prayer that she may share the joys of the citizens of heaven once she has left this vale of tears [cf. Ps 83.7].

Although separated from you by so great a distance, blessed lady, we gladly send our greetings, embracing in you the mighty works of God [cf. Eccles 18.5; Acts 2.11], for, through God's grace, the sanctity of your exceptionally pure life shines above all others, and the spirit of prophecy, with which you are divinely endowed beyond human understanding, enables you to comprehend the present, unveil the past, foresee the future.<sup>a</sup> Thus doubly honored by an unheard-of gift of God, you are truly the object of wonder and veneration by the people of this age. Indeed the Dawn has visited us [cf. Luke 1.78] and has placed His hand upon this tottering age<sup>b</sup> since, even in the midst of the storm clouds of this evil generation [cf. Gal 1.4], He has graciously given such a one as you to bring light to our time. As a result of this divine intervention, therefore, we rejoice to be able to comprehend the divine ordering of things, and to obtain forgiveness for our sins, remedy for our pains, and consolation for our grief.<sup>c</sup>

Yet our conscience still accuses us, our guilt terrifies us, and our sins rebuke us. We are troubled within, endangered without. Security eludes us, for the enemy hosts resound on every side. A deceitful friend lies in ambush on the right; a savage adversary besieges us on the left.

About these matters, and others, which our messengers will inform you of, holy mother, consult the divine oracle [cf. II Sam 21.1], and write back to inform us what we may expect from the mercy of God.

## 91r

# Hildegard to the Abbot Adelbert

Before 1170

Whatever specifics the messenger may have supplied, Hildegard nevertheless answers the general letter in very general terms, admonishing Adelbert that he is too weak and indulgent in correcting the vices of his subordinates.

He Who sees and is subject to no change says: You do not yet have wings to fly, O human being, wings to bear up under storms or even to glide in serene weather. But you are like a pillar without a pedestal standing in the street, and so you are splattered by all the mud. You are too indulgent, for you do not have the keen and critical eye necessary to condemn the black and wicked ways of mankind. All the same, God in His grace is mindful of you, for you are not afflicted with hardness of the heart, but are merely asleep in undisciplined listlessness so that you do not attend God zealously.

Do not regard your Lord as your servant, but look to Him faithfully like an honorable knight who, armed with helmet and breastplate, fights bravely in the battle. These times are the times that cast God into oblivion, times weary of waging Christ's battle. Through the vain love of novelty and change, lies fly abroad, as if the people see God—and yet they know Him not.<sup>1 a</sup>

Where, therefore, are the people who walk in the straight path [cf. Prov 14.2]? They are few indeed. But He Who Is [cf. Ex 3.14; Apoc 1.4] says: No man, for all his babbling, can draw the sword of my vengeance from the sheath before the appointed time of my vengeance. Therefore, O human being, rise up and bring light to your spirit through me, so that you may vigilantly search me out. Then you will have life.

### *Note*

1. This characterization of her own age as a degenerate time, a time of a falling away from God—which she frequently denominates as a womanish age—is a recurrent theme in Hildegard's work.

## 92

## Hildegard to the Abbot Adelbert

Before 1170

Another letter of advice to Adelbert, this one stressing the monastic virtue of stability. In response, apparently, to an inquiry about a religious pilgrimage, Hildegard advises the abbot to attend to his duties and govern his flock with proper responsibility.

Bear your burden faithfully in the straight paths, and keep your sheep in line to the best of your ability. For this is better for you than pilgrimages to foreign lands, because God has the same power over the works of man in all places.<sup>1</sup> And with God's help, keep your mind from wandering about, like the day that shifts capriciously between bright sunshine and violent storm. For sometimes your mind is, as it were, in such a heightened state of holiness that you can scarcely bear it, but, at others, it is troubled by weariness and other such hindrances.<sup>a</sup>

Now, therefore, rise up into the proper warmth of the purest sun, because although you are in many ways restricting your sacrifice to Him, God still wants you [cf. Ps 21.9], because He has established you as His very eye.<sup>b</sup> Therefore, do not withdraw from Him.

## Note

1. This passage calls to mind St. Jerome's famous dictum: "Non Hierosolymis fuisse, sed Hierosolymis bene uixisse laudandum est," that is, "It is praiseworthy not to have been in Jerusalem but to have lived well in Jerusalem," where the second Jerusalem clearly stands for "the holy," or "heavenly" Jerusalem. Jerome's admonition was frequently cited in the twelfth century, especially in seeking to dissuade monastics from engaging in spiritual travel, for pilgrimage, in one sense at least, was in sharp conflict with the monastic emphasis on *stabilitas*. See Giles Constable, *Religious Life and Thought*, especially the chapters "Monachisme et pèlerinage au Moyen Age" and "Opposition to Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages."

*Erfurt*

93

**A Certain Provost to Hildegard**

Before 1173

The provost testifies to the widespread fame of Hildegard's sanctity, and expresses the desire to see her in person.

To the lady Hildegard, beloved bride of Christ, A., provost of Erfurt, although unworthy, sends all his devout prayers and devoted obedience.

We never cease lifting up our thanks to you, because your sanctity has spread far and wide, and because you greet so many with the sweet salutation of your letters. With our whole heart we long to see you, and we hope and pray to take delight some day in the kindly words of your consolation, and, enflamed by seeing you face-to-face, to be made joyous through you. May divine mercy, which has begun so holy and so magnificent a work in you, fulfill this our desire, and, in response to your assiduous prayer, make us participants in that goodness of yours.

Now, therefore, blessed lady, we faithfully commend to your love the bearer of this letter, our friend who has made this trip for God's love and yours. May he be mercifully received by you, and merit to hear the words of the Holy Spirit speaking through your mouth.

*Erfurt (St. Cyriacus)*

94

**An Abbess to Hildegard**

Before 1173

The abbess entrusts herself and her nuns to the prayers of Hildegard, who, she believes, has been specially anointed by the Lord.

To Hildegard, the mirror of sanctity, N., unworthy abbess of Christ's handmaidens dwelling on Mount St. Cyriacus in Erfurt, with our prayers that she may partake of the joys of eternal brightness.

"Glorious things are said of thee" [Ps 86.3], servant of God. Therefore, although I am heavily burdened with sin, I ask you to reach out the hand of your prayer to me, imitating in this way your Beloved, who stretched out His hand to the leper [cf. Mark 1.40–42]. I know that you have been anointed "with the oil of

gladness above thy fellows" [Ps 44.8]. Therefore, on bended knees I beseech you to show compassion on my distress when, having entered the Holy of Holies, you have laid hold of the celestial and eternal. I adjure you to implore your Bridegroom—and mine—for my sake, a poor little woman, that my faults may be reconciled to His grace. Indeed, beloved of Christ, how can it be said that you have divine love if you have not sympathy for the weakness of others? Therefore, let me and the sisters entrusted to me be commended to you. Pray that our feet will stay on the straight paths [cf. Ps 25.12; Ecclus 51.20] so that, made perfect in our journey, we may reach the day of bliss. Intercede with Him who has hidden us "in the secret of His face, from the disturbance of men" so that He may deign to "protect us in His tabernacle from the contradiction of tongues" [Ps 30.21]. And may He "Who keepeth truth for ever" [Ps 145.7] grant us to be willing, and able, to perform all that He commands.

We, therefore, commit the whole of our community to you, holy lady, and we pray from the bottom of our hearts that we may have the assurance of your prayer. May your glory, saintly lady, grow, flourish, and be strong.

## 94r

# Hildegard to the Abbess

Before 1173

Hildegard admonishes the abbess to be more moderate in the governance of her nuns, for affliction of the body by overzealous abstinence can cause vices to flourish.

O daughter of God, you are surrounded by Christ's love. Still, the bitterness of the flesh inhibits your spirit, and so you rebel by lashing out at the devil. I see that your people are well grounded in the faith, and this is pleasing to God. I see also that they are rising up strenuously into the better part [cf. Luke 10.42] and that although they are not fully established in the religious way of life, they are nevertheless growing vigorously.<sup>a</sup> Therefore, let your spirit rejoice in God, and remain devoutly in Him.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, you are ignorant of the way to break the bonds of those who are entangled [cf. Ps 106.14], those, that is to say, who wander aimlessly as the object of mockery [cf. Ps 106.40]. And you cannot figure out what to do. Why do I say this? A certain person kept watch over a large tower to see that it did not shift, but his efforts were in vain. Therefore, he cried out in his distress, "Oh woe, woe is me." And so the people mocked him, saying, "What does it profit you to constantly wage war against those who reject you?"<sup>b 2</sup>

So look to the lofty mountain, to Him who will respond to you with steadfast love: "My daughter, my daughter, what is it that you want? Whatever you seek from me for your soul's sake, I will grant."

*Erfurt*

## 93

## A Certain Provost to Hildegard

Before 1173

The provost testifies to the widespread fame of Hildegard's sanctity, and expresses the desire to see her in person.

To the lady Hildegard, beloved bride of Christ, A., provost of Erfurt, although unworthy, sends all his devout prayers and devoted obedience.

We never cease lifting up our thanks to you, because your sanctity has spread far and wide, and because you greet so many with the sweet salutation of your letters. With our whole heart we long to see you, and we hope and pray to take delight some day in the kindly words of your consolation, and, enflamed by seeing you face-to-face, to be made joyous through you. May divine mercy, which has begun so holy and so magnificent a work in you, fulfill this our desire, and, in response to your assiduous prayer, make us participants in that goodness of yours.

Now, therefore, blessed lady, we faithfully commend to your love the bearer of this letter, our friend who has made this trip for God's love and yours. May he be mercifully received by you, and merit to hear the words of the Holy Spirit speaking through your mouth.

*Erfurt (St. Cyriacus)*

## 94

## An Abbess to Hildegard

Before 1173

The abbess entrusts herself and her nuns to the prayers of Hildegard, who, she believes, has been specially anointed by the Lord.

To Hildegard, the mirror of sanctity, N., unworthy abbess of Christ's handmaidens dwelling on Mount St. Cyriacus in Erfurt, with our prayers that she may partake of the joys of eternal brightness.

"Glorious things are said of thee" [Ps 86.3], servant of God. Therefore, although I am heavily burdened with sin, I ask you to reach out the hand of your prayer to me, imitating in this way your Beloved, who stretched out His hand to the leper [cf. Mark 1.40–42]. I know that you have been anointed "with the oil of



gladness above thy fellows" [Ps 44.8]. Therefore, on bended knees I beseech you to show compassion on my distress when, having entered the Holy of Holies, you have laid hold of the celestial and eternal. I adjure you to implore your Bridegroom—and mine—for my sake, a poor little woman, that my faults may be reconciled to His grace. Indeed, beloved of Christ, how can it be said that you have divine love if you have not sympathy for the weakness of others? Therefore, let me and the sisters entrusted to me be commended to you. Pray that our feet will stay on the straight paths [cf. Ps 25.12; Eccles 51.20] so that, made perfect in our journey, we may reach the day of bliss. Intercede with Him who has hidden us "in the secret of His face, from the disturbance of men" so that He may deign to "protect us in His tabernacle from the contradiction of tongues" [Ps 30.21]. And may He "Who keepeth truth for ever" [Ps 145.7] grant us to be willing, and able, to perform all that He commands.

We, therefore, commit the whole of our community to you, holy lady, and we pray from the bottom of our hearts that we may have the assurance of your prayer. May your glory, saintly lady, grow, flourish, and be strong.

## 94r

# Hildegard to the Abbess

Before 1173

Hildegard admonishes the abbess to be more moderate in the governance of her nuns, for affliction of the body by overzealous abstinence can cause vices to flourish.

O daughter of God, you are surrounded by Christ's love. Still, the bitterness of the flesh inhibits your spirit, and so you rebel by lashing out at the devil. I see that your people are well grounded in the faith, and this is pleasing to God. I see also that they are rising up strenuously into the better part [cf. Luke 10.42] and that although they are not fully established in the religious way of life, they are nevertheless growing vigorously.<sup>a</sup> Therefore, let your spirit rejoice in God, and remain devoutly in Him.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, you are ignorant of the way to break the bonds of those who are entangled [cf. Ps 106.14], those, that is to say, who wander aimlessly as the object of mockery [cf. Ps 106.40]. And you cannot figure out what to do. Why do I say this? A certain person kept watch over a large tower to see that it did not shift, but his efforts were in vain. Therefore, he cried out in his distress, "Oh woe, woe is me." And so the people mocked him, saying, "What does it profit you to constantly wage war against those who reject you?"<sup>b 2</sup>

So look to the lofty mountain, to Him who will respond to you with steadfast love: "My daughter, my daughter, what is it that you want? Whatever you seek from me for your soul's sake, I will grant."

*Erfurt*

## 93

## A Certain Provost to Hildegard

Before 1173

The provost testifies to the widespread fame of Hildegard's sanctity, and expresses the desire to see her in person.

To the lady Hildegard, beloved bride of Christ, A., provost of Erfurt, although unworthy, sends all his devout prayers and devoted obedience.

We never cease lifting up our thanks to you, because your sanctity has spread far and wide, and because you greet so many with the sweet salutation of your letters. With our whole heart we long to see you, and we hope and pray to take delight some day in the kindly words of your consolation, and, enflamed by seeing you face-to-face, to be made joyous through you. May divine mercy, which has begun so holy and so magnificent a work in you, fulfill this our desire, and, in response to your assiduous prayer, make us participants in that goodness of yours.

Now, therefore, blessed lady, we faithfully commend to your love the bearer of this letter, our friend who has made this trip for God's love and yours. May he be mercifully received by you, and merit to hear the words of the Holy Spirit speaking through your mouth.

*Erfurt (St. Cyriacus)*

## 94

## An Abbess to Hildegard

Before 1173

The abbess entrusts herself and her nuns to the prayers of Hildegard, who, she believes, has been specially anointed by the Lord.

To Hildegard, the mirror of sanctity, N., unworthy abbess of Christ's handmaidens dwelling on Mount St. Cyriacus in Erfurt, with our prayers that she may partake of the joys of eternal brightness.

"Glorious things are said of thee" [Ps 86.3], servant of God. Therefore, although I am heavily burdened with sin, I ask you to reach out the hand of your prayer to me, imitating in this way your Beloved, who stretched out His hand to the leper [cf. Mark 1.40–42]. I know that you have been anointed "with the oil of

Now, let your mind be at ease, and take peace unto yourself. For I see in the True Light that this will be salutary for your spirit. But see to it that you show proper concern for your little garden,<sup>3</sup> being careful not to overwork it, lest the viridity of the herbs and aromatic virtues fail, so that they become incapable of bearing seed because they have been worn down by the plow of your toil. I frequently see that when a person afflicts the body by overzealous abstinence, weariness sets in, and, as a result, vices flourish more than if the body had been nourished properly.<sup>4</sup>

A compassionate, loving mind has been planted in you. Therefore, beware lest you heed the commands to wound the body too frequently. But announce the times properly appointed for the balm of salvation to those committed to your care, and then you will live forever.

I see your spirit shining brightly in pure light.

### Notes

1. The entire first half of this letter poses a number of difficulties for a reader, perhaps even a twelfth-century reader. See the endnotes for the Latin text.

2. We have broken the paragraph at this point to indicate the end of Hildegard's illustrative anecdote. It could be, however, that the anecdote continues through the end of the next paragraph.

3. Hildegard's word here is *terram*, which, apparently, in the immediate context stands for the body, but should, perhaps (as the next paragraph suggests), be broadened to include the entire community. The abbess/abbot (gardener) overseeing (cultivating) the community of those souls committed to her/his care (the garden) is an image dear to Hildegard.

4. Hildegard's sense of moderation is one of her more attractive characteristics: she is neither a body-denying ecstatic nor a flesh-scourging ascetic.

### *Erlesbüren(?)*

## 95

# Hildegard to an Abbess

1166–70(?)

**Hildegard admonishes the abbess to follow the Rule of St. Benedict assiduously, and singles out a particular nun whom she should “nourish with the milk of consolation.”**

**O blessed soul, you have climbed the ladder of celestial desire to seek the kingdom of God, according to His command: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God,” and so forth [Matt 6.33]. For when you first submitted yourself to God's service, you were given the desire for heaven which would lead you to the heavenly abode.**

Now, let your mind be at ease, and take peace unto yourself. For I see in the True Light that this will be salutary for your spirit. But see to it that you show proper concern for your little garden,<sup>3</sup> being careful not to overwork it, lest the viridity of the herbs and aromatic virtues fail, so that they become incapable of bearing seed because they have been worn down by the plow of your toil. I frequently see that when a person afflicts the body by overzealous abstinence, weariness sets in, and, as a result, vices flourish more than if the body had been nourished properly.<sup>4</sup>

A compassionate, loving mind has been planted in you. Therefore, beware lest you heed the commands to wound the body too frequently. But announce the times properly appointed for the balm of salvation to those committed to your care, and then you will live forever.

I see your spirit shining brightly in pure light.

### Notes

1. The entire first half of this letter poses a number of difficulties for a reader, perhaps even a twelfth-century reader. See the endnotes for the Latin text.

2. We have broken the paragraph at this point to indicate the end of Hildegard's illustrative anecdote. It could be, however, that the anecdote continues through the end of the next paragraph.

3. Hildegard's word here is *terram*, which, apparently, in the immediate context stands for the body, but should, perhaps (as the next paragraph suggests), be broadened to include the entire community. The abbess/abbot (gardener) overseeing (cultivating) the community of those souls committed to her/his care (the garden) is an image dear to Hildegard.

4. Hildegard's sense of moderation is one of her more attractive characteristics: she is neither a body-denying ecstatic nor a flesh-scourging ascetic.

### *Erlesbüren(?)*

## 95

# Hildegard to an Abbess

1166–70(?)

Hildegard admonishes the abbess to follow the Rule of St. Benedict assiduously, and singles out a particular nun whom she should “nourish with the milk of consolation.”

O blessed soul, you have climbed the ladder of celestial desire to seek the kingdom of God, according to His command: “Seek ye first the kingdom of God,” and so forth [Matt 6.33]. For when you first submitted yourself to God's service, you were given the desire for heaven which would lead you to the heavenly abode.

Then through the prompting of the devil, the winds of vice came rushing upon you, but even they could not move you from your desire.

Therefore, daughter of God, act like those on board a ship who heed the ship's pilot so that he can bring them safely to harbor. For God will give you all things that pertain to the salvation of your soul if, through your holy calling to obedience, you observe the Rule of Saint Benedict as best you can. The pilot of the ship is, in fact, the teaching of the blessed Benedict, who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, gave the precepts of spiritual life. In the spirit of those precepts, gather the daughters of God to yourself, for they have been entrusted to you through Benedict's authority. Among those is the daughter of God, Elizabeth, whom you must keep in your heart with blazing love, and continually nourish with the milk of consolation. See also that you preserve yourself from the baleful wind of vainglory and from your own self-seeking will, for such desires are deadly to human beings. And do this in genuine humility, for humility always rises upward, since it considers itself the least. But vainglory always falls, since it seeks to exist on itself alone.

May the Holy Spirit now gird you with the girdle of sanctity, so that you may build a habitation for yourself in the eternal mansion of the heavenly Jerusalem [cf. Heb 12.22].

### *Esrum*

## 96

# Hildegard to the Monk Frederick

Before 1170

Hildegard admonishes Frederick to show mercy to his brother Rudolph, who is suffering great distress at the moment, for his soul will be in even greater danger if Frederick refuses to allow him to stay in the monastery where he has sought refuge.

I heard Wisdom say these words: The sun shines brightly, but then dark clouds cover it over. Why? Because the situation of the sun is unstable, since it is frequently blasted by dangerous winds. Still, the sky clears up again, happily, and the sun shines once more. So it is with a person's mind. How? When the virtues of God ascend into the temple, that is, into the heart of man, then many times, through the deceptions of the devil, a whirlwind of vices comes and brings darkness in the temple. But can night and storm prevent the sun from ever shining again? Of course not. The same is true of a holy spirit. For although set amidst great dangers and worn down by the vicissitudes of life, it is still capable of good works, and is indeed eager to rise up to them. Therefore, dear son, be not afraid, because God wants your soul in the sacrifice of praise [cf. Ps 49.14, 23] offered through the sacrificial victim of the ram [cf. Gen 22.13]. And you will be a stone without blemish in the temple of God.

Then through the prompting of the devil, the winds of vice came rushing upon you, but even they could not move you from your desire.

Therefore, daughter of God, act like those on board a ship who heed the ship's pilot so that he can bring them safely to harbor. For God will give you all things that pertain to the salvation of your soul if, through your holy calling to obedience, you observe the Rule of Saint Benedict as best you can. The pilot of the ship is, in fact, the teaching of the blessed Benedict, who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, gave the precepts of spiritual life. In the spirit of those precepts, gather the daughters of God to yourself, for they have been entrusted to you through Benedict's authority. Among those is the daughter of God, Elizabeth, whom you must keep in your heart with blazing love, and continually nourish with the milk of consolation. See also that you preserve yourself from the baleful wind of vainglory and from your own self-seeking will, for such desires are deadly to human beings. And do this in genuine humility, for humility always rises upward, since it considers itself the least. But vainglory always falls, since it seeks to exist on itself alone.

May the Holy Spirit now gird you with the girdle of sanctity, so that you may build a habitation for yourself in the eternal mansion of the heavenly Jerusalem [cf. Heb 12.22].

### *Esrum*

## 96

# Hildegard to the Monk Frederick

Before 1170

Hildegard admonishes Frederick to show mercy to his brother Rudolph, who is suffering great distress at the moment, for his soul will be in even greater danger if Frederick refuses to allow him to stay in the monastery where he has sought refuge.

I heard Wisdom say these words: The sun shines brightly, but then dark clouds cover it over. Why? Because the situation of the sun is unstable, since it is frequently blasted by dangerous winds. Still, the sky clears up again, happily, and the sun shines once more. So it is with a person's mind. How? When the virtues of God ascend into the temple, that is, into the heart of man, then many times, through the deceptions of the devil, a whirlwind of vices comes and brings darkness in the temple. But can night and storm prevent the sun from ever shining again? Of course not. The same is true of a holy spirit. For although set amidst great dangers and worn down by the vicissitudes of life, it is still capable of good works, and is indeed eager to rise up to them. Therefore, dear son, be not afraid, because God wants your soul in the sacrifice of praise [cf. Ps 49.14, 23] offered through the sacrificial victim of the ram [cf. Gen 22.13]. And you will be a stone without blemish in the temple of God.

Also with respect to the aforementioned afflictions, be mindful of your brother Rudolph, who endures great suffering in your country, and see to it that you do not prevent him from staying in that holy monastery where he presently is. And know for certain that if you pull him out of that place, his soul will be overshadowed by great distress. As for you, live, and cause your talent to grow [cf. Matt 25.14–23; Luke 19.12–26] in your Lord.

*Flonheim*

## 97

## A Certain Provost to Hildegard

Before 1173

The provost writes Hildegard to repeat his petition that she pray God to reveal to her anything that pertains to him.

To the Lady Hildegard of Bingen, saintly and reverend mother in Christ, H., unworthy provost of Flonheim, offers the great devotion of his prayers and obedience.

God, Who sees all hearts, knows how gladly I would honor you with my expressions of allegiance, saintly lady, if only divine providence had provided an opportunity. In the meantime, accept my devotion, and, as I asked you some time ago, pray to the Lord for me that He might reveal to you all things that pertain to me, so that I may offer thanks for the good, and may, before I die, merit to render satisfaction to God with the fruits worthy of penitence [cf. Matt 3.8; Luke 3.8] for the evil. Please be kind enough to inform me in writing whatever the Lord reveals to you about me, and keep me in your prayers. I would have written more fully and intimately to you if the weakness of my body had not prevented me from doing so.

*Frankfurt*

## 98

## A Certain Provost to Hildegard

Before 1173

A brief letter asking Hildegard to keep the writer in her prayers.

To Hildegard, his beloved lady in Christ, G., unworthy provost in Frankfurt, sends his wish that she share the labor of Martha and the consolation of Mary [Luke 10.38ff].

Also with respect to the aforementioned afflictions, be mindful of your brother Rudolph, who endures great suffering in your country, and see to it that you do not prevent him from staying in that holy monastery where he presently is. And know for certain that if you pull him out of that place, his soul will be overshadowed by great distress. As for you, live, and cause your talent to grow [cf. Matt 25.14–23; Luke 19.12–26] in your Lord.

*Flonheim*

## 97

## A Certain Provost to Hildegard

Before 1173

The provost writes Hildegard to repeat his petition that she pray God to reveal to her anything that pertains to him.

To the Lady Hildegard of Bingen, saintly and reverend mother in Christ, H., unworthy provost of Flonheim, offers the great devotion of his prayers and obedience.

God, Who sees all hearts, knows how gladly I would honor you with my expressions of allegiance, saintly lady, if only divine providence had provided an opportunity. In the meantime, accept my devotion, and, as I asked you some time ago, pray to the Lord for me that He might reveal to you all things that pertain to me, so that I may offer thanks for the good, and may, before I die, merit to render satisfaction to God with the fruits worthy of penitence [cf. Matt 3.8; Luke 3.8] for the evil. Please be kind enough to inform me in writing whatever the Lord reveals to you about me, and keep me in your prayers. I would have written more fully and intimately to you if the weakness of my body had not prevented me from doing so.

*Frankfurt*

## 98

## A Certain Provost to Hildegard

Before 1173

A brief letter asking Hildegard to keep the writer in her prayers.

To Hildegard, his beloved lady in Christ, G., unworthy provost in Frankfurt, sends his wish that she share the labor of Martha and the consolation of Mary [Luke 10.38ff].



Also with respect to the aforementioned afflictions, be mindful of your brother Rudolph, who endures great suffering in your country, and see to it that you do not prevent him from staying in that holy monastery where he presently is. And know for certain that if you pull him out of that place, his soul will be overshadowed by great distress. As for you, live, and cause your talent to grow [cf. Matt 25.14–23; Luke 19.12–26] in your Lord.

*Flonheim*

## 97

## A Certain Provost to Hildegard

Before 1173

The provost writes Hildegard to repeat his petition that she pray God to reveal to her anything that pertains to him.

To the Lady Hildegard of Bingen, saintly and reverend mother in Christ, H., unworthy provost of Flonheim, offers the great devotion of his prayers and obedience.

God, Who sees all hearts, knows how gladly I would honor you with my expressions of allegiance, saintly lady, if only divine providence had provided an opportunity. In the meantime, accept my devotion, and, as I asked you some time ago, pray to the Lord for me that He might reveal to you all things that pertain to me, so that I may offer thanks for the good, and may, before I die, merit to render satisfaction to God with the fruits worthy of penitence [cf. Matt 3.8; Luke 3.8] for the evil. Please be kind enough to inform me in writing whatever the Lord reveals to you about me, and keep me in your prayers. I would have written more fully and intimately to you if the weakness of my body had not prevented me from doing so.

*Frankfurt*

## 98

## A Certain Provost to Hildegard

Before 1173

A brief letter asking Hildegard to keep the writer in her prayers.

To Hildegard, his beloved lady in Christ, G., unworthy provost in Frankfurt, sends his wish that she share the labor of Martha and the consolation of Mary [Luke 10.38ff].

I have greatly desired to see you in person, but various matters of business have prevented me. Now, at least, God has granted me the opportunity to embrace you and greet you in a letter. We would not have you ignorant of your good reputation, but at the same time we are unwilling to embrace you with our greeting beyond what is proper. We will intercede to God for you to the best of our ability both day and night.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, compassionate lady, please remember me, sinner that I am, before the merciful majesty of God. Farewell, while it is called “today” in heaven [cf. Heb 3.13].

#### Note

1. There are problems with translation of the almost opaque Latin here, numerous problems, and we cannot be assured that we have solved all of them satisfactorily. The emendations of the *Patrologia* editor, who makes all passive infinitives active and all second person plural pronouns first person plural, will perhaps indicate something of the desperateness of the passage. Van Acker, nevertheless, preserves the MS reading intact with no indication whatsoever of any problem. See endnote for the Latin text.

## 98r

# Hildegard to the Provost

Before 1173

Hildegard replies to the provost with a letter of general consolation.

In a true vision I heard and saw these words: Sometimes the first light of day shines brightly, but, later, dawn is stripped away because the sky becomes overshadowed with great storm clouds. Then the eagle soars high and sighs deeply, because the earlier part of the day was beautiful and free from the turbulence of the storms.

Therefore, O man, you who have knowledge of good and evil [cf. Gen 2.21], consider what kind of person you are and give thought to all the things you have done in God’s sight since childhood. Take heed to such things, lest the zeal of the Lord strike you, and lest your spirit say on its departure from the body, “Woe is me! What lies before me, and where will I go?” Or, “What have my days been like, and what, my works? They are such as the millhouse of my body has revealed to me.”<sup>a</sup> Beware also, lest you shake with fear when the citizens of heaven say to you, “See what kind of God God is.”

Now, live forever.

*Gandersheim*

## 99

## Hildegard to the Abbess Adelheid

1152–70

Addressed as it is to a nun<sup>1</sup> formerly under Hildegard's governance, and indeed a nun that she fought to retain, this letter of general consolation and admonition surprises with its objective and generalized tone. Note Adelheid's more personal tone in the letter that follows.

The Serene Light says to you: Day excels the night, but night speaks knowledge [cf. Ps 18.2]. How is this so? Day gives proof to the visual and auditory senses of what ought to be rejoiced in and celebrated, while night provides the opportunity to make useful choices, and waits upon the day. Sometimes, however, a storm precedes the day, and only afterward does the day appear clear and bright.

You have been in the first light, O daughter of God, and you have been trod down in the winepress [cf. Is 63.3; Lam 1.15]. But, later, you have walked on broad paths. Now, be careful not to leave the good paths, because God wants you and knows you, and, if you look to Him, He will speedily aid you. But when you reach out to the vanity of the world, it overwhelms you. Therefore, choose from these two directions what is good for you, because if, by seeing and hearing, you call upon God, He will not abandon you.

May God so help you that the day shines in you, and the night withdraws from you, so that you may become a jewel amid virtues. Then you will live forever.

*Note*

1. Adelheid was the niece of Richardis, Hildegard's favorite nun (see Introduction, Vol. 1, p. 18, and Letters 4, 12, 13, 13r, 18, and 64). Adelheid was a nun along with Richardis in Hildegard's community at Mount St. Rupert. During that time both girls were elected abbess of other communities, an election in both cases that Hildegard strongly opposed. Adelheid took up her duties in 1152.

## 100

## The Abbess Adelheid to Hildegard

1152–73

Alluding to her early years under Hildegard's tutelage, Adelheid writes Hildegard in the name of "ancient friendship," begging to renew earlier ties.

Adelheid, unworthy abbess of the church at Gandersheim, to Hildegard, beloved mother of Mount St. Rupert, with a prayer that she, as the bride of free Jerusalem [cf. Gal 4.26], receive the kisses of the Bridegroom.

A good tree is known by its good fruit [cf. Matt 12.33], and ought never to be cast into oblivion, because by producing sweet fruit it has earned the sweet love of good men. A person, therefore, who does not properly embrace things that are truly delightful will, rightly, be regarded as lower than brute beasts.<sup>a</sup> And so, unsullied dove [cf. Hos 7.11] of Christ, great and pure in spirit, just as good does not create evil, nor light bring forth darkness, nor sweet produce bitterness, so too you never depart from my heart. Likewise, you ought to keep me frequently in mind, since, as is well known, I am joined to you in intimate closeness of love and devotion. I do not want the flower, nursed so gently in former days, to dry up in your heart, the blossom that once vitally flourished between the two of us at the time when you were gently educating me. By that love and by the love of your beloved Spouse, I beseech and implore you to send up prayers and supplications to God both for me and for my flock and for the community that was entrusted to me by your permission. Also, I ask that you deliver us up to the prayers of all your sisters. I pray also that you work out a kind of alliance<sup>b</sup> between your sisters (nay, mine also) and mine, and, when a messenger becomes available, send us a letter informing us, in Christ, what you feel about this matter, as well as any other. I myself, God willing, will not delay a visit to you when the time becomes available, so that we may speak face-to-face, and, hand in hand, do what is good. In this way, our ancient friendship will be strengthened. May God, Who is love [cf. I John 4.16], make it strong!

O you “who live in gardens” [Cant 8.13], give heed, and, as cordially as possible, greet for me all those who dwell with you, that is to say, my sisters, and make me joyful with your approving letter.

## 101(100r?)

### Hildegard to the Abbess Adelheid

1152–73

Van Acker's initial sense that this letter is not in answer to the preceding one is, surely, correct. Thus his number in parentheses with a question mark comes as something of a surprise. This letter, in its rather cool admonitory tone, is scarcely an appropriate answer to Adelheid's passionate plea for closer emotional ties. The letter was, it would appear, written at a much later time than the preceding one. Note Van Acker's suggested twenty-year time frame for the two.

O daughter of God, your mind is distressed by great anxiety in two ways. For on account of a certain kind of worry you are wasting away, almost to the point of

*Gerbstädt*

## 110

## An Abbess to Hildegard

Before 1173

Because the “fragrance” of Hildegard’s virtues has spread throughout the Church, “even into our regions,” the abbess writes the holy lady with a petition that she be included in her prayers.

To the venerable lady Hildegard, a burning and shining lamp, R., by the grace of God abbess in Gerbstädt, although unworthy, with a prayer that she run in the race until she achieves the eternal reward [cf. I Cor 9.24].

Since, as the Apostle witnesses, each member of the Church is a part of every other member [cf. Rom 12.4–5], there is much for the individual children of the Church to rejoice about, because the fame of your sanctity, flying everywhere, has spread the fragrance of your virtues throughout the whole Church. And so wafting even into our regions, it has greatly excited our hearts to render thanks to the Author of all good. Therefore, desiring to be made a participant of your merits, I, the least among the faithful, pray as fervently as possible that I may merit to be included in your prayers. And if you will grant my petition, I promise to send my prayer promptly, worthless as it is.

Wherefore, I appeal to your nurturing nature, beloved lady, to send, with full devotion, some word for my benefit. Thus the more abundantly your memory flourishes among us, the more your goodness will rejoice us. Farewell.

## 110r

## Hildegard to the Abbess

Before 1173

In this short response to the abbess, Hildegard expounds the enigmatic biblical verse “Day to day uttereth speech, and night to night sheweth knowledge” [Ps 18.3], an explication which is itself, it must be admitted, somewhat less than clear.

Daughter of God, rise up in the nighttime through the four elements, which fulfill all works during the day. Night brings sadness through darkness, and day, joy through light. For it is written: “Day to day uttereth speech, and night to night sheweth knowledge” [Ps 18.3].

Here is the meaning of this Scripture: God is the day that never grows dark and never changes through the times and the seasons. And God chose the day for Himself, that is, the bright light from the light, because He made His creature, that is, man, whole with all things that were present to Him. But the serpent came and puffed up the woman through his eloquence, and she accepted it and inclined to the serpent. And what she tasted from the serpent she gave to the man [cf. Gen 3.1–6], and this has remained in the man, because man does all works fully. God did not command this to be done, but the serpent deceived the woman through his false and deceitful words. In this way the serpent passed on the taste of the flesh, and it is as slippery and fickle and false as the counsel of the serpent is. For the serpent, in his falseness, hid his evil will toward mankind, since man would never have consented to his counsel if he had known that perdition lay in store for him. And just as man has the knowledge of good and evil, so the serpent has a fraudulent and evil nature. But the swift hart and the strong lion in his den<sup>1</sup> had the means to cut the one off from the other. For God chose a virginal material in which He prepared humanity for His Word, because the Virgin knows no contamination of the taste of the flesh, and so the Word of God took on a foreign nature, that is, became man. So Christ the man lived on earth from day to day, and in this way He deceived the serpent that had cursed the man. For Christ the day conquered all poisonous things of the night, because, with amending penitence, He washed away the taste of the flesh that the serpent had put into man through his trickery. In this way He invests man with a foreign nature, when He gathers His own to Himself. Also, the serpent frequently harms many people through the fraudulence that conceals his malice, causing them to become doubtful, as if unaware that God exists, and thus he cuts them off without faith and without hope. Yet many people fight against this attitude, saying: My destruction will not come from my Creator, but from my own sins. This fight is like the torments endured by the martyrs and the pains suffered by the wounded Christ.

The first woman was the aforesaid night, and she showed knowledge to the night [cf. Ps 18.3], that is, to the man. But you, O daughter of God, make yourself beautiful with the martyrdom of good work, so that your soul may shine in God.

#### Note

1. That is, the Divinity.

deeds of man's iniquity have not yet been fully purged by the hand of God. But in not too long a time, those evils will come to an end, and a better light than before will shine.

Now, however, certain men are divided into two parts in their hearts. On the one hand, in high pride of mind they wish to know all things, and, on the other, they hate the success of those who walk in the straight path [cf. Prov 29.27]. This diabolical crowd, evil of heart, treat the others harshly and cruelly. Still, this generation of malignant spirits does not dare to contradict what God has established, but they make each cause a matter of disputation so that what they willfully choose to their own damnation they claim to be good and holy in God. In this way, they lead the people into great scorn. But how is this generation to be put to flight? It is destroyed by the humility and stability of the faithful.

*Herkenrode(?)*

117

## An Abbess to Hildegard

Before 1173

In this brief letter, the abbess praises Hildegard highly for all the wonders God has worked through her and expresses a desire to see her in person, although she never expects to be able to do so because of the difficulties of travel. She commends herself and her community to Hildegard's prayers.

To the most beloved lady and dearest mother in Christ, N., unworthy abbess of the sisters of the N. church, with a prayer that she see the King of glory in all His beauty [cf. Is 33.17], and rejoice with Him forever.

Blessed be God, Who deigns through you to wondrously declare the mysteries of His secrets never before heard in our days to the world, and to confirm our faith through you, holy mother. Moreover, through you, He ineffably illuminates His Holy Church with the blazing virtues of His signs, as with the rays of a new sun. Who has ever heard the like? Who has ever seen such things [cf. Is 66.8]? Therefore, let us each, let us all say: Blessed be God.

I earnestly desire to see your face, holy lady, and to hear the divine words from your own mouth. But since on account of the difficulties of time and distance, I cannot fulfill my desire by seeing you in person, I will always see you in my heart and soul, and I will always love you. I also beseech your holiness, merciful mother, to deign to intercede with God—Who, without a doubt, will hear you—for me a sinner and for our community, which joins me in supplication to you. You may be assured also that your memory will always be blessed among us, and, through you, the name of the Lord will be magnified. Pray for us, merciful mother and lady.

Furthermore, for the mercy of God and of your maternal love, we ask you to send us a letter of consolation right away. May Christ our Lord deign to gather us along with you into His kingdom.

## 117r

## Hildegard to the Abbess

Before 1173

Hildegard offers a general letter of admonition, warning especially against lack of stability.

Take care not to have a wandering, instable mind, in which the sapphire-colored cloud cannot be seen, for such instability frequently blocks out the light of the sun. Be zealous to stand steadfast, therefore, and do not foolishly inquire into useless matters, for those who do so often fall deceived from the love of Christ, just as the sapphire cloud is obscured by instability of mind. Keep your mind on the embraces of Christ, and seek all good things from Him. Offer up all your works to Him, and He will bless you, for, without Him, there is no salvation for mankind, since grace and salvation is obtained not through man, but through God. Also, Holy Scriptures, which flow from the divine fountain, are the breasts from which mankind sucks sustenance.

Learn, therefore, to flee the vanity that covers the light of the sun, that is to say, separates mankind from Christ. And you will live forever, and be crowned by Christ.

*Himmerod(?)*

## 118

## Hildegard to an Abbot

About 1171(?)

Hildegard writes in answer to questions the abbot had addressed to her in a letter that has not come down to us. It is clear from the response, however, that the abbot had asked her to predict something about the state of a certain woman, and, apparently, also something about his own administrative situation. Hildegard answers that she can report only those things she sees in her visions, and does not ordinarily address the future lives of men and women. She does, however, instruct the abbot to rule his flock with discretion and mercy.



O gentle father, I am not accustomed to speak of the various events in the lives of men and what their future will be. For poor little untaught feminine form that I am, I can know only those things that I am taught in a true vision. Yet I will gladly include that woman you mentioned in my prayers, praying that the grace of God may rule in both her body and her soul, and that she may rejoice as a worthy heir of God.

I heard these words in a true vision of my soul: Beware, O man, lest you rise higher than your ability can reach, but in all cases embrace Discretion, sweet mother of the virtues, so that you may be guided by her in all things. Then you cannot fall. For a shepherd who holds the rod of correction but lacks discretion cannot please God, nor even be loved by his sheep. Rather, he is held in contempt.

Good father, rule your sheepfold with mercy, imitating God Who wishes mercy more than sacrifice [cf. Hos 6.6]. And take care that all your works are done in true humility. For it was through humility that the true Sun, that is, the Son of God, descended from the kingdom of the Father into the womb of the Virgin, so that you might live eternally with Him.

### *Hirsau*

## 119

# Hildegard to the Congregation of Monks

Before 1153

Hirsau was an old and famous monastery, having been founded in 830 A.D. It was a center of the Reform Movement, and was still flourishing in Hildegard's time. In this letter, Hildegard lashes out at the monks and the general evils of the world as a prelude to her plea for them to take a certain fugitive monk back into their community.

The Living Light says: O you who row your boat in the shipwreck of this world, why have you allowed the infirmities of the great dangers of fetid iniquity to debilitate you through your self-imposed blindness? Let no one disarm himself, for the world has entered an age of injustice, and has been cut off from the heights of glorious victory because of the storms of a black tyrant. Therefore, rise up and arm yourselves against the savage spears of the lust of the flesh and the spittle of the devil. Follow the footsteps of that One who carried His lost sheep back to the heights through the kiss of His humanity,<sup>1</sup> bearing it back in the arm of His power [cf. Matt 18.12f; Luke 15.4ff] through the sweet fragrance of His mercy [cf. Eph 5.2; Phil 4.18].

Therefore, mercifully take back that fugitive, for he laments his foolish behavior. Embrace him with full devotion, and, forgiving his guilt, lead him back into the stability of your community.

May God kindle His light in you, lest you be extinguished in the light of truth.

*Note*

1. Cf. St. Bernard on the opening words of Canticles. See Vol. 1, p. 142, n. 1.

120

## The Congregation of Monks to Hildegard

1153–54

In distress of mind, the monks of Hirsau write Hildegard about the problems in their monastery—favoritism shown by their abbot, friction between the abbot and the prior, and (to them, most grievous) the disrepute that the community has fallen into among the laity because of these problems. They beseech Hildegard to intercede with God for them in their great need.

To the Lady Hildegard, chosen of God to build up the Church, a poor and fearful group of monks in Hirsau, with a prayer that she be so adorned with divine mercy that she will know how to console Christ's humble ones in their tribulation.

Blessed be the glory of the Lord, Who has looked down from His exalted throne in a wondrous and unheard-of way, for He wanted the great light of His grace to illumine the world through you. Therefore, all the sons of the Church rejoice, but we especially, who in our spiritual calling are steeped in a new light of exultation, although, at the same time, we endure great sorrow because of the failings of our community. We trust that you will be able to bring us the joy of divine consolation.

Please pay attention for a while to our problems, for we are in the utmost anxiety and great distress of mind. We would not, as God is our witness, detract from our abbot in any way. Still, we are forced to groan because he is so frequently deficient in paternal compassion toward us, while, at the same time, he is overly indulgent toward certain friends of his. Moreover, in all matters, he exercises unrestrained power recklessly. And if we grieve that our reputation is being torn apart by these insults and disgraces as a result of these matters, we weep even more for the lamentable discord that arose among us long ago and for the trouble that has recently arisen between that abbot of ours and our prior, which has brought our religious calling into great contempt among the seculars.

Therefore, uncertain what to do, we humbly pray that by your prayers the will of God will become a little clearer concerning these matters. But if we deserve to receive a letter of assurance from you about what is best to do in these matters, or what is pleasing to God, we will make it our goal, always, to pay back this kindness with our own prayers, for we know that this, our only possible course of action, will please you most, beloved lady.

120r

## Hildegard to the Congregation of Monks

1153–54

Hildegard comforts the monks by assuring them that their monastery can regain its original luster, just as spring follows winter. The Living Eye, she assures them, knows the source of their difficulties, which she then lists in detail. Finally, she takes the opportunity—once again, as in her preceding letter—to beseech them to show mercy to those deserving of it.

The Serene Light says: O lamenting sheepfold adorned with the sign of obedience, be stable in your thoughts, and heave up your desires to the love of God. Take heed where prosperity lies—and where adversity. Consider the nature of the valleys. For a while they grow green and flourish from the dew of heaven and the warmth of the sun, but, with the change of the seasons, they dry up and fade away. Yet although they lose their beauty at the end of the season, I do not forget that they will flourish again.

So, too, I do not forget your monastery, for, through the grace of Wisdom, it retains the basic material of sanctity so that it can return to its pristine righteousness. Be, therefore, a bright, victorious sheepfold, trampling underfoot those vices which are troubling you in a difficult time. And do not blush to accuse yourselves of evil works, for God anoints all wounds, and, through penitence, cleanses.

The Living Eye has, nevertheless, taken note of the original cause of anguish that is troubling you, and knows too that it comes from the stubbornness of your higher prelates. For the sweetness of the anointing mother Mercy has been withheld from certain of the sheep among you, who were wrongly given penance out of all proportion to their fault. An unseasonable rain makes the land arid. Thus if a man sins and has no one to anoint him, he will flee and dry up, for the medicine administered to him is too harsh.

Now, dear sons, hear the voice of the Living Light. Reach out and grasp mercy, which comes not from you, but only from God; and so do not withhold it from those to whom it should be extended. Bring them back, therefore, and restore health to their souls.

## 121

## Manegold to Hildegard

1156(?)

Manegold<sup>1</sup> was elected abbot of Hirsau on 25 March 1156 at the age of 60. Perhaps because of his advanced age, perhaps because of the general unrest in the monastery, he experienced many difficulties during the period of his administration. In his troubles, he turns to Hildegard for advice and assistance.

To his most holy lady and mother Hildegard, M., unworthy abbot of Hirsau, offers his prayers and obedience.

I have heard that there is a spring of water at Cyrene that flows with wine, just as among the Germans you, good mother, are a spring of waters rushing in and out, a bosom of spices, and, for visible things, sight to the eyes. For you, my lady, drink deep and pour forth into forms our minds can grasp, and, in practical matters, you are force and motion urging to the life of contemplation.<sup>2</sup> \* Therefore, I have long been impelled—and still am—to esteem, honor, and admire you, as well as to serve you and yours, and in all things, both in word and deed, to be yours and your sisters' in prayers and obedience to the extent that it is proper for me.

I beg you, my mother and lady, remember me in your most holy prayers, and love the one who most humbly loves you. May you take cognizance of the one who reveres you in Christ, and please, in God's name, write a letter back to me.

## Notes

1. Despite Van Acker's unequivocal heading, there are problems with the attribution of this letter. The superscript in the MSS attributes it simply to the abbot of Hirsau, and the text of the letter supplies only the initial *M*. Van Acker's question mark after the date of 1156—the year of Manegold's election as abbot—is the only indication of the problem.

2. Our translation of this sentence represents our reasoned wrestling with an exceptionally obscure (perhaps corrupt?) text. See endnote for the Latin.

## 122

## Hildegard to Manegold

Early 1156

It is difficult to determine the subject matter or the intent of this brief, enigmatic letter. The “vessel” (*allam*) of the first sentence—as in the following letter—is apparently Hirsau itself.

The vessel I see now is much stronger than the one I saw earlier, and it will never fall or break. Your knowledge, which is the eye of your spirit, looks to God as a child looks to the father he loves. For you stand in the resplendent road, and you look to the east. A black cloud, however, is causing you to grow weary. Nevertheless, it will not destroy you.

A peaceful gift should have been given to you in the light, but those who are black in their ill will prevented it from being offered, and they gnash their teeth like a bear. I see that the spirit of your abbot<sup>1</sup> is somewhat less than courageous, but is still restless in the belly, breast, and brain.<sup>2</sup> After his death, I see that there will be a violent storm in that monastery—but, after that, a resplendent light.

*Note*

1. This sentence makes it clear that Manegold is not yet abbot. Therefore, if the preceding letter (where the correspondent is clearly identified as abbot) was indeed written by Manegold, it surely should be placed after this one.

## 123

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

Hildegard seeks to comfort Manegold for the heavy burden of office that has fallen his lot. Then she advises him to keep a tight rein on his subordinates.

Sweetest father and brother in Christ's love, I saw a vessel bathed in such great brightness that I could scarcely tell whether it was a vessel at all. But I also see something somewhat bitter in taste, broken by great strife. Then, it is overtaken by a whirlwind. Still, it is predestined for God's reward.

Yet I saw that this heavy burden is not a sign of God's wrath.<sup>1</sup> Still, those with the character of bears and panthers will rush upon you, and you will be subjected to the poison of vipers [cf. Deut 32.33]. But the sword of God will cut them down, and you will arise among them like a noble knight.

Now I admonish you to rein in your subordinates, and not allow them to slander you. The True Light says to you, Why do you not strike those evil servants, who seize you like wolves, and lay secret ambushes for you like spiders. Keep a careful watch, for the morals of the people require it in this evil time.

O gentle father, the True Light does not reveal to me, poor little woman that I am, that you are to give up your office. Bear in mind that you are a human being on earth, and do not fear so greatly, because God does not always demand heavenly attributes from you.

#### Note

1. Probably in response to Manegold's own characterization of the new burden of office that has befallen him.

## 124

# Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

Hildegard gives some general comments about the duties of office.

The Mysteries of God say: God wants the heavens to be upheld. Why do I say this? Heaven is that father who has the duty of providing sustenance for his sheepfold, for just as heaven reveals all the stars, so the father makes known to his sheepfold all the commandments of God. And the father should not become negligent and weary, lest his lord say to him: "Worthless servant" [Matt 18.32; Luke 19.22], why do you scatter my sheep [cf. John 10.12]? But let his lord say to him, "Well done, good servant" [Matt 25.21ff; Luke 19.17], and let him add, Mindful of me, you will lead the flocks to pasture, as long as the sheepfold does not say, "We will not have this man to reign over us" [Luke 19.14]. If the sheepfold says this, it is to be abandoned, just as Jesus left the unbelieving Jews behind.

As for you, O man, you will remain in God forever. Take care of all things faithfully.

## 125

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

Hildegard seeks to comfort the abbot in his troubles, stressing to him that trouble and care are a necessary part of life.

Father, you supposed that there would be peace without anxiety in your days. Never will it happen! Such a thing is surely not possible in this age. The days that have been granted to you, however, are bright, for the night of incredulity, weariness, and horror is not overclouding your day. Bear in mind, therefore, that God chose David, and that David's kingdom did not perish with him, and that David did not lose his soul. For all that, however, he still endured great grief and toil. Still, God did not call David's days "dark." Bear in mind also that Elijah cried out, lamenting that almost no human being sees God in the dawn of faith. But remember too how God answered him [I Kings 19.9ff].<sup>1</sup> So it is in your case. For in your monastery there are many souls that shine like the bright dawn, because God loves them very much. This is the case in your own spirit. Adam was expelled from paradise [cf. Gen 3.24], and, thereafter, none of his children ever saw paradise again with physical eyes. But holy and blessed spirits make a paradise for themselves with the flowers of virtue, and they sigh for the things of heaven. And in the army of your people such heavenly things are a hundred, a thousand times more numerous than among others who are more changeable. But God said to the people of Israel that he would give them a land flowing with milk and honey [cf. Ex 3.8]. Nevertheless, the thunder and lightning of God's wrath still fell upon them.

Now, do not be incredulous about such things, for no one can have peace without anxiety in this present life, but only in life everlasting. But you are rather headstrong and dark in disposition. Still, there are some beautiful maidens knocking at the door of your mind, but you are not quick to answer them. Rather, you say, "I am so overburdened by trouble and worry that I cannot stay with you." The beautiful virtues then say to you, "We had no such trouble in forming you, and we have never failed to meet your needs. And so why do you answer us like this?"

Now gird yourself with holy Love, and she will, in purest humility, kiss your heart.

*Note*

1. The Lord's answer was that there were 7,000 left to Him whose knees had not bowed to Baal.

## 126

**Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold**

1156–65

A brief letter seeking to lift the abbot's mind from earthly worry to more spiritual concerns.

O father in your calling and brother in the love of God, eradicate the uneasiness of your mind from the eye of your heart, and remove every trace of sadness from yourself and your flock. Now is a time of war against the morals of mankind, for they have neither discipline nor consciousness of the fear of the Lord. As for you, however, do not be afraid because you are the vessel of the fiery Spirit. Sometimes you endure tribulation and affliction, but do not be afraid, because the Son of God endured the same things.

Now, live forever and the Holy Spirit will not abandon you.

## 127

**Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold**

1156–65

Another brief letter of praise and exhortation.

In the presence of God, you are like the smoke of myrrh and incense [cf. Cant 3.6], and, therefore, Mt. Sion asks that you be food in the house of Jacob [cf. Gen 42.1]. But if anyone cuts down the pillar that supports the entire house, he overthrows the house. Look out the seven windows, and consider what direction the hawk comes from, but take care that he does not carry you off.

Feed your sheep [cf. John 21.17] with mild chastisement, for the day of your salvation has not yet passed, and you will not yet become ashes. Also, be the mirror of life in the eyes of the dove.



## 128

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

Hildegard senses that something is amiss with the abbot and the monastery, and she urges him to assert himself.

O father and gentle brother, I see that there is some matter that is causing you to become weary and forgetful. I see also that the fire is not blazing brightly in either your spirit or in your sheepfold. But you say to yourself, "I cannot stand against them." And so you settle your mind as if you were asleep.

But it cannot rest there. For the day of salvation shines forth in you because God helps you in everything you have undertaken with His guidance. For He brought forth all creatures, and He named them in Himself. Now, may He Who will gather all things unto Himself on the last day make the fire in you blaze brightly.

## 129

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

Hildegard once again touches on the problems in the monastery—all of which seem to stem from Manegold's mild and gentle manner of governance.

O loving father, you are a son of the toils of this age, but still God draws you to Himself. The present age is a time of tribulation and grief, a time, among the sons of men, of going astray. And we, who are supposed to be spiritual people, have been overshadowed by the deceptions of the spirits of the air. And so even in your community I see malignity like lead. Still, God's light is with you.

Wisdom says to you: Withdraw and retire a short while and a short distance from your sons. Still, do not cast aside the rod of your authority, but hold it in your hand, just as a father sometimes withdraws from his son when that son has brought disgrace upon him. But when the son falters, he calls his father back, and begs him for forgiveness [cf. Luke 15.11ff].

This is now your situation. For your sons will be greatly embarrassed by the prelates and the other members of the community, who say to them that they refused to tolerate a good and upright man as their superior. Thus your sons, embarrassed and humbled, will call you back, beating their breasts, and your

administrative relationship with them will be a lot better than before. This is one of the snares that He predicted to you, but, all the same, God will not abandon you.

Now, regain your strength and become a stalwart knight, and God will assist you.

## 130

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

This obscure message, as Hildegard herself calls it, breaks off before it is finished.

In my vision your community is like a tower with two windows. One of these windows has the radiant splendor of the dawn, although it is overshadowed by a cloud. The other is as bright as daylight. Yet from its base up to the very middle, that tower is exceedingly black; and this blackness seeks to cover over those two windows. But it will be incapable of affecting them. Also, I see that your spirit is like that kind of day when the sun shines in the morning, although the day itself is full of storms. Still, those storms are not very dangerous, and from time to time the sun shines through them.

I am giving you this obscure message at this time, but, later, when God wills it, . . .<sup>1</sup>

*Note*

1. The letter breaks off at this point in the MS.

## 131

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

Hildegard gives an allegorical account of the monastery, and answers specific questions that Manegold had directed to her about particular individuals.

I looked to Wisdom, and I heard and saw these words: There was a tree in Lebanon, and winter, as usual, came upon it. It is winter's nature to cause all things to

wither and lose their moisture, but the root of that tree was so firmly planted in the ground that the winter was not able to destroy it. Still, the trunk of the tree was damaged somewhat by the weather. Its leaves, however, did not lose their viridity, and did not fall.

Now, father, understand that this imagery is directed to you. The monastery you ask about is like a valley set next to a field that is only slightly warm and fertile when the seed is planted, but which is yet magnificent in the part where the sun shines frequently. And the grace of God does not despise it, for it is caught up in the treadle winepress<sup>1</sup> that constantly churns until the people are cleansed from their present error. And the people will become better after not too long a time.

Also, concerning that soul you asked about, it now has great merit among the saints, but, earlier, it made a serious error in judgment, which it did not recognize as such. And so in attempting to justify itself, it sought out things that were none of its business. For this reason it suffered heavy punishments. When human beings who are predestined for sanctity do not do the good works they know and understand through divine grace, God does not show the signs of his saints to them.

The death of that individual about whom you asked is not yet at hand. Moreover, your own death is also not immediately imminent. And that person you ask about had a generosity that ascended to God, and God loved him.

These are the words of Wisdom that I, poor little woman that I am, have written to you. Now I admonish you not to greatly fear the gloom that appears on the trunk of that tree I mentioned earlier, the gloom that results from the filthy, vile character of human instability. And do not withdraw from your salutary way of life, nor from your good works. Then you will live forever, and your heavenly Father will receive you in joy.

### *Note*

1. Cf. Isaiah 63.2–3: “Why then is thy apparel red, and thy garments like theirs that tread in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the Gentiles there is not a man with me; I have trampled on them in my indignation, and have trodden them down in my wrath, and their blood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my apparel.” For the Middle Ages, this verse is a figure of the crucifixion, and therefore of redemption.

## 132

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

Hildegard advises Manegold to be more balanced in his governance, taking the good with the bad.

Oh, person, flee the storms and vices that incline to the vicissitudes of squalid morals, and do not regard the captain who steers his ship as a mere servant who is sometimes cherished and sometimes ignored. This is the way you look upon your garden: you rejoice when prosperity shines on it like the sun, and you grow angry when a cloud covers it over with excessive disturbance. But have patience in each instance, until God assists you.

Your worry was certainly understandable, for there was clearly too much heedless conviviality there, though I do not see this resulting in disastrous shipwreck. And I do not see your monastery being totally disrupted. But let the Fiery Illuminator enkindle your heart.

## 133

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

The details of this letter are quite enigmatic, though the imagery is familiar. Once again, Hildegard's point seems to be that Manegold should rule his community with more authority.

Loving father and beloved brother, the grace of God looks upon you with wide-open eyes. Yet your mind is caught up in a whirlwind, for you endure new losses over and again. Still, in the midst of this whirlwind, your mind shines like the dawn and sees a number of young men among your congregation, some of whom are black and filthy, but some a little purer. Nevertheless, in some sense, they are all like the whirlwind, and are of one mind. But, still, most of those in your congregation are bright as stars, and the others are like the dawn.

Therefore, sweet father, hold the iron rod in your hand vigorously [cf. Ps 2.9], and, with God's help, surrounded by the heavenly host, rule them as best you can. Then the grace of God will never desert you. Live forever.

## 134

## Hildegard to the Abbot Manegold

1156–65

A brief letter of reiterated praise.

My father and the pastor chosen by God to rule over the blazing flock of your sheepfold, hear. I see you in a bright light and your community as a glowing radiance, as I told you before.

Now live, and be perfect [cf. Matt 5.48] in the viridity of the virtues of God.

## 135

## Hildegard to Abbot Manegold(?)

1156–65

In this allegorical letter, Hildegard recommends patience to the abbot so that he might realize his full potential.

In your works and morals I see you as a tree that has great viridity in its leaves. One branch, however, is drying up. And the elements say: We have come to you on account of the blend of your viridity, but storms injure us. These storms are the doubts and the moral vacillation, which, on account of your tribulations, cause you to go in circles, like a mill wheel.

But let it not be so. Look to the farm land, which is tilled and plowed and fertilized so that it might bring forth much fruit. This is Patience, which produces humidity and viridity in all good works. Patience's house is harsh and bitter, but it gives great rewards and opens the gate of the heavenly kingdom.

And so draw Patience to you, and diligently avoid the jacinth and the beryl, which do not flash with brilliance; and keep yourself from those flowers that lack the viridity of virtues and therefore quickly wither, for these love you not for the love of penitence but for the discord of disobedience.

That monastery in which you live is pleasing to God. Therefore, embrace and kiss Patience, and do not put her aside, for you have the potential to wash clean the wounds of men, and thereby to set up a ladder into heaven. And you will live forever.

## 136

Hildegard to the  
Abbot Manegold(?)

1156–65(?)

This brief letter is in answer to a query from the abbot about the relations between some unnamed man and woman.

Regarding the subject you ask me about: Victory does not drink deep of lust in this matter. But, still, the bond of flesh, which you seek to know about, is stronger in that man than in the woman. Yet I would not want to see that sinful deed consummated. But in you I see a whirlwind of heat that, having spent itself, will disappear harmlessly.

*Hördt*

## 137

## Hildegard to the Canon Lemphrid

1153–54

In answer to the canon, who had apparently asked her advice about changing communities, Hildegard gives her usual advice: stay where you are; the pastures only look greener over there.

He Who poured the good and sweet intelligence into mankind says these things: Faithful men have the sweet odor of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. So in whatever community holiness is, there man can be restored to life in the shipwreck of this world. Therefore, O worthy knight of Christ, seek the salvation of your soul in the community where you are, where the living fountain pours a sweet flood into your soul, because those foreign monasteries that you have so firmly fixed in your mind offer no security for you. Therefore, stay in your place, and, there, love the first gift given to you from above [cf. James 1.17], when your soul was renewed in righteousness. For it is not conducive to the safety of your soul to seek out a different place. But flee this desire for change, lest your mind be confounded by fear.

Now, be such that you become the friend of God, and do not flee the ceremonies of God [cf. Deut 8.11]. And God will save you.

# Introduction

This, the second volume of the translation of Hildegard of Bingen's correspondence, contains 176 letters, all of which are directed to, or received from, figures in the Church—abbots and abbesses, monks, nuns. Twenty-three of the letters are unilateral, that is, they are from correspondents to Hildegard, for which we have no corresponding letter from the saint, either initiatory or in response. This lack may, of course, be the result of simple failure in transmission of the texts, but there is also sufficient evidence from the letters themselves to indicate that, owing to the press of her duties and writing, Hildegard was not always up to the task of responding. It was, for example, only after a barrage of letters that the persistent Guibert of Gembloux was able to make the contact with the saint that he so desperately desired. Or compare the following plaintive cry from the monks of St. Michael in Siegburg:

*He Who knows all secrets is aware with what an extraordinary feeling of love we have chosen you as our spiritual mother and have brought you into the circle of our prayers, and you yourself, beloved lady, have been able to observe this from the sheer number of messages we have sent to you. Yet you have never shown us any sign of motherly affection. And despite our desire, you have never even sent us a letter of admonition, which you should have done even against our will, just as a mother gives wholesome advice to her children.*

This is an especially interesting letter, since it attests both to a failure in transmission (where are all those earlier letters that they sent to her?) and, apparently, to Hildegard's occasional negligence in keeping up with her correspondence. Given the circumstances of the time, it could, of course, be that those letters simply did not reach her, which would account too for their not being preserved,

but there are numerous other complaints from writers who received no reply to their request, and Hildegard herself confesses to Guibert of Gembloux that the heavy press of her duties has kept her from responding. On the whole, however, Hildegard was quite attentive to her epistolary duties, and we are very fortunate that so large a body of her correspondence has come down to us.

Perhaps the most important group of letters in this collection is those exchanged between Hildegard and Guibert of Gembloux. This Walloon monk, who was later to become Hildegard's secretary, was unrelenting in his efforts to get the saint to respond to his specific questions about her life and visions. And, unlike his contemporaries, he asked the kind of questions that concern us all. Do you, he wanted to know, receive your visions in Latin? Or do they come to you in German, with someone else translating them into Latin as you utter them? Do you receive these visions in a dream while you are asleep, or in an ecstatic state while awake, and do you indeed, as is widely reported, promptly forget the entire vision once you have given voice to it? What is the basis of your learning? Is it from diligent study, or has everything come to you through divine inspiration? Modern scholarship owes much to this farsighted monk who saw fit to ask such specific and detailed questions, and would not rest without receiving some sort of answer.

Other notable letters in this collection are those addressed to her own nuns at Mount St. Rupert; those from the young mystic, Elisabeth of Schönau, along with Hildegard's response; Letter 169r, Hildegard's treatise against the heresy of the Cathars in response to a request from the monks in Mainz; the letter from Volmar, Hildegard's first secretary, who served her faithfully for some thirty years in that capacity; Hildegard's brief letter to her blood brother Hugo; the letters to and from Ludwig, abbot of St. Eucharius.

But the book lies open before you. Read and enjoy.

We cannot take leave of this work without expressing our deep regret on the passing of Lieven Van Acker, the editor of the Latin text of these letters, on which this translation is based. Professor Van Acker's prodigious work on Hildegard's correspondence was truly a labor of love, which he continued even in the midst of his last illness until his death on 16 December 1994. We are deeply regretful that he did not live to see his work through to completion. It was a monumental undertaking, executed with meticulous care and precision. We mourn his loss. The world of scholarship owes him an inestimable debt.



gladly, with the kiss of love. The grace of God suffuses all things through the sun of justice [cf. Mal 4.2], both the harsh and the benevolent, and it hears all those who cry out to Him with the sighs of their hearts in order to know Him. For just as God established the sun to give light to the whole earth and to dispel darkness, so through His grace does He reject harshness so that He will not respond to the hard-hearted man who calls out to Him.

So do not fear those things that torment you, for I do not see that your monastery will be destroyed. God wishes you to fulfill the obligation of your burden. And so gather to you those sheep who run willingly to you, and, mercifully, tolerate those who will not, until they call out to you. And so, live forever!

### *Kaufungen*

147

## An Abbess to Hildegard

Before 1173

The abbess writes praising Hildegard for her prophetic gifts, and asks for a letter of consolation from her.

To the lady and sister Hildegard, N., a sinner, and abbess (in name only) in Kaufungen, with a prayer that she not hide the light of her knowledge under a bushel [cf. Matt 5.15; Mark 4.21; Luke 11.33].

Forestalled by the unexpected haste of this messenger, I was unable to write anything very polished to you, lady and mother, but could only manage very common language as to a beloved sister. So please receive it as such. It is widely reported that that flying scroll which was given to the prophet to eat [cf. Ezech 3.1ff; Zach 5.1f] now rests in your mouth, because of your wisdom. Oh, how precious is that treasure! Beware, therefore, not to foolishly gulp it down. But “run about, make haste, stir up” [Prov 6.3] the Church, or rather the leaders of the Church, to whom it is said as it was to Peter: Simon, “could you not watch one hour with me” [Matt 26.40]. We rejoice and tremble because you have seen the rod that keeps watch from the north over iniquity [cf. Jer 1.11ff]. Therefore, we desire to receive a letter of consolation from you.

Farewell in Christ. Remember me whenever you call upon Him so that I may merit to partake of the grace He has bestowed upon you.

147r

## Hildegard to the Abbess

Before 1173

Hildegard advises the abbess to live virtuously and to continue in her zeal for good works, for her "days are not long."

In the Spirit, I tell you truthfully: Guard your spirit so that it will not be polluted with iniquity. Also, gird your body with the justice of God. Do this before the day of your death, because afterward there is no remedy, save what you find through God's grace and through the ornament of your works:

The hawk, your enemy, is circling around you, seeking to wound your spirit. Guard yourself from him by your zeal for good works and abstinence from sin, because your days are not long. Therefore, let the Holy Spirit kindle His fire in you, so that you will remember these words.

And so, again, I will tell you a parable: the trees wither in the winter, but in the summer they blossom luxuriantly. Now, in your spirit consider how long you have wandered astray in the winter of the spiritual life. And so run quickly to the viridity of the Holy Spirit, which is summer, by changing your morals. In this way, bring forth flowers of virtue, and gather your sheaves [cf. Ps 128.7] as fast as you can. Therefore, keep yourself from sin, for I tell you in truth that if you seek God's grace, it will not flee from you.

*Kempten*

148

## An Abbot to Hildegard

About 1166 (?)

The abbot praises Hildegard for the gifts God has bestowed upon her, and asks her to communicate any revelation God has revealed to her about him or his church.

To Hildegard, bride and servant of Christ, acceptable to both God and man [cf. Tob 14.17], H., abbot, in name only, of the church at Kempten, sending his devoted service and continual prayer.

Blessed be God, Whose "Spirit breatheth where he will" [John 3.8], for He has so frequently filled and enriched the chambers of your heart with the delights of the heavenly music that he has made you an object of veneration and

And again I, a poor little feminine form, saw an unsheathed sword hanging in the air, one edge of which was turned toward the heavens, the other toward the earth. And this sword was stretched out over the spiritual people, just as the prophet had long ago foreseen when he cried out in wonder: "Who are these, that fly as clouds, and as doves to their windows" [Is 60.8]? For these were those who were lifted up from the earth and separated from the common people, and they were expected to live saintly lives in simplicity of morals and works like the dove, but now they have become depraved in their morals and their works. And I saw that that sword was cutting off certain monasteries of spiritual men, just as Jerusalem was cut off after the Passion of the Lord. But still I saw that in that adversity God will preserve for Himself many priests who are devout, pure, and simple, just as He answered Elijah, saying that there remained to him "seven thousand men in Israel, whose knees have not been bowed before Baal" [I Kings 19.18].

Now, may the unquenchable fire of the Holy Spirit so infuse you that you will turn to the better part [cf. Luke 10.42].

### Notes

1. See Letter 15r, n. 2.
2. That is, Church offices, the sin of simony.
3. Here, Hildegard echoes the biblical passage in greater detail than a translation can adequately render. See Latin passage in the endnote.

## *Kitzingen*

### 150

## The Abbess Sophia to Hildegard

Before 1153

Hildegard was on very friendly terms with Sophia, abbess of Kitzingen. In this letter of praise, the abbess announces that she is coming to meet with Hildegard, bringing along with her a close friend and praiseworthy nun. At the end, almost as an afterthought, she asks whether it would be proper for her to resign her administrative office.

To Hildegard, mistress of singular merit, unique with sapphires [cf. Cant 5.14] of spiritual virtues, Sophia, called abbess in Kitzingen but deficient in herself, with resolute prayer.

Because of your great sanctity, I am flying with swift wings to the bosom of your love, seeking, for the sake of light, to be commended to you, who, through the True Light, has merited to be revealed for the illumination of the people.

Who would not take delight in the home of the mother of wisdom?<sup>1</sup> Who would not willingly give ear to the symphony of heaven? Who would not long

to hear the instrument of the Holy Spirit foreordained for the chimes of so many virtues, mystically embossed with so many miracles? Pleasing indeed was that sound that “hath gone forth into all the earth” [Ps 18.5], whose harmony the Spirit “who proceedeth from the Father” [John 15.26] made pleasant.

Therefore, cry out with fortitude, you who announce peace far and wide, and all the nations beyond the rivers of Ethiopia will come to you bringing gifts of praise. And I also, like the others, run to compete in the race, not expecting the prize [cf. I Cor 9.24], but still hoping, for, as the Apostle says: “It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” [Rom 9.16]. Thus it is with anyone who receives some part of your saintly prayers, which you offer for free to all as an obligation resulting from God’s nearness to you and love of you.

Venerable mother, worthy of all praise, I am bringing with me a well-born peer of mine, a praiseworthy nun, a sister acceptable in every way, whom the heavenly Father has created as my spiritual sister. It is God’s will that the two of us make your acquaintance.<sup>1</sup>

“Let thy voice sound in my ears” [Cant 2.14], and reveal God’s will to me: Which would be more salutary for me—to lay down the burden I bear or to carry it longer?

#### Note

1. The word for *wisdom* here is *sophie*, in this letter from the abbess Sophia.

## 150r

# Hildegard to the Abbess Sophia

Before 1153

In this brief reply to the Abbess Sophia, Hildegard, as might be expected, urges her to remain in her office.

O Sophia, I say this to you according to a mystic vision: Let your spirit be strengthened by God, touching God with appropriate sighs. The burden of your labor, which God has given you to bear, is good for you, as long as your sheep are willing to hear God’s admonition through your governance. And if any spark still shines among them, do not abandon them, lest the devil<sup>1</sup> snatch them away.

Let your spirit shine in God, and your days burn bright in the Fiery Giver.

#### Note

1. Literally, the “snatcher.”

## 151

## Hildegard to the Abbess Sophia

About 1155(?)

In this second letter to the abbess, Hildegard once again urges her not to give up her administrative duties, while at the same time acknowledging that she understands the anguish she is going through.

In the True Light I saw a fiery sphere like a wheel turning inside you. You are walking on a narrow path, looking to the sun, but, for all that, the winds of a cloud's instability will overshadow you because your mind wanders. You cry out: When will God set me free? And He will answer you, I will not forsake you [cf. Josh 1.5; Heb 13.5], but I want you to seize the net so that it is not torn, for if you cast it aside, it will turn down another way,<sup>1</sup> and this would not be pleasing to God.

Now, rejoice in God [cf. Phil 3.1; 4.4] and live forever, because God loves you.

*Note*

1. The sense of this passage is not altogether clear. Is "seizing the net" an allusion to the gospels' "I will make you fishers of men," with the suggestion being that Sophia should govern her community effectively and not abdicate her administrative duties, lest her subordinates go astray?

## 152

Hildegard to Rumunda,  
a Lay Sister

Before 1170

A letter of comfort to a lay sister who is having problems and doubts.

The Secret Light says: You are worn out, like a person cut off from the household of the One Who created you. But you will be called back from among the foreigners. Therefore, cease from your sins, for God has not sold you into perdition [cf. Baruch 4.6], but He has found you like the lost sheep that has been called back to life [cf. Matt 18.12ff; Luke 15.4ff].

Why do you have doubts as if you did not have salvation? Seek God, therefore, in the anxiety and anguish of your spirit, and you will live [cf. Ps 68.33; Amos 5.4–6].

*Krauftal*

## 159

## The Abbess Hazzecha to Hildegard

1160–61

During her preaching tour of 1160, Hildegard visited Krauftal, and, in this letter, the abbess recalls that time with joy. In addition, she asks for further words of chastisement and correction from the Living Light.

To Hildegard, the provident steward of the house of the great Father of the family [cf. Luke 12.42], Hazzecha, humble and unworthy abbess of Krauftal, with maternal veneration and daughterly devotion, through the love by which we are joined together in Christ.

After your friendly visit, which I had desired such a long time, I merited, God helping, to be relieved from my weakness of spirit and my earlier tribulations [cf. Ps 54.9], and managed to rest a little. And because I have no doubt that your words do not come from any human imagination but from the True Light itself, which has illumined you more than any other human being, I have followed your advice and postponed what I originally proposed to do.

I want you to know, my lady and dearest sister, that just as I greatly desired to see you—and still do—I always cling to you in my heart, even though I cannot be with you in person. Now, since I am sure that you abide in love and love abides in you [cf. I John 4.16], I beseech you in the name of that love not to delay writing to inform me of the fitting chastisement or correction the Living Light reveals to you through His Spirit concerning me.

## 159r

## Hildegard to the Abbess Hazzecha

1160–61

Hildegard criticizes the abbess for not performing her administrative duties to the best of her ability, and warns her to give up her plans to seek out a solitary life.

**He Who sees all things says: You have eyes to see and look all around yourself. Where you see mud, wash it away, and where you see aridity, make it green. And make those spices which you have give forth a sweet odor. If you had no**

eyes, you could excuse yourself, but since you do have them, why do you not use them to look all about yourself. You use high-sounding words in your sophistry, for frequently you judge others for the very things you yourself would not want to be judged for. But then, sometimes, you do speak with wisdom.

Take care to carry your burden properly, and gather good work in the sack of your heart, lest you fall by the wayside. For you could not find quiet in the solitary life that you ask about because of your unstable character. And then your last days would be worse than the first [cf. Luke 11.26], and as heavy as a stone. But emulate the chastity of the turtledove, and diligently watch over the choice vineyard, so that you might look to God with a pure and righteous face.

## 160

### The Abbess Hazzecha to Hildegard

About 1161(?)

The abbess pleads with Hildegard for consolation and advice, for she is terrified at the burden of her office.

To the most loving lady Hildegard, effulgent with the sacred gift of divine and true visions, Hazzecha of Krauftal, abbess (in name only), with a prayer that she receive the overflowing gift of perfect love.

My lady, the eloquence of your most holy soul flows down from the height of your contemplation as from the tops of the eternal hills, down into the deepest valley of other souls. And like “a shower upon the herb, and as drops upon the grass” [Deut 32.2], it permeates them, and causes them to bring forth flowers without thorns, and to put forth living shoots of celestial desire bursting forth with a wondrous aroma that reaches to the very throne of the glory of almighty God.

Therefore, I, your handmaiden, hope to see a letter from you, saintly lady, and to be refreshed by your sweet words of consolation as if by a light breeze. For, my mother and lady, all my hope and security, all my refuge and safety depends, after God, on you. And so I run back to you alone, and, after Christ, I entrust myself to your advice and aid.

Therefore, I humbly entreat you again, and implore you, in your compassion, to pray to God on my behalf. May you please also let me know what I must do for my many excesses, for because of them and because of other transgressions, as I mentioned earlier, I am remiss in the burden of the title that has been imposed on me. For I am afraid—indeed terrified—that I am incurring God’s wrath. Farewell.

## 160r

## Hildegard to the Abbess Hazzecha

About 1161(?)

In large allegorical terms, Hildegard advises the abbess about her administrative duties.

In a true vision I heard these words that with burning desire you sought from me because of your great need. Faithful governance is exceedingly praiseworthy when it has these two edges of a sword: one which, along with shields, breastplates, and other armament, is used to guard the tower, and fight those who would destroy it; the other which defends its city with brave knights so that its walls are not captured by the enemy, its gates opened to treacherous spies, and the knights killed. Under such governance, men are blessed.

Those who lack such governance are worse than peasants who shrewdly and selfishly manage their farms thinking only of their herds and their fodder. About such it cannot be said: "Who is she that goeth up by the desert, as a pillar of smoke of aromatical spices, of myrrh, and frankincense, and of all the powders of the perfumer" [Cant 3.6]. Nor can the following be said: "How beautiful are thy steps in shoes, O prince's daughter" [Cant 7.1]. Here is the meaning of the verse: He who denies his own will in the exile of this world (which is what "the desert" signifies) rises up to God, through all his works, by sighing to Him, for, as it is written, the perfume of aromatic spices rises in the sight of the Lord [cf. Cant 3.6]. For he chooses to mortify his flesh, and so from the perfume of the spices and the mortification of the flesh, all the virtues grow in him, and he is never satiated. That passage concerning the celestial citizens of angels and saints is addressed to the one who does this: "How beautiful are thy steps," that is to say, the zeal in which you walk by mortifying the flesh, "O prince's daughter." But, according to the prophet, he who is neither hot nor cold will be spewed out of the mouth [cf. Apoc 3.15–16], because he puts forth no effort in either earthly or heavenly things. I compare such a one to locusts, which do not fly with the birds, nor walk with the animals on the earth. Rather, they drift uselessly, like a whirlwind, which quickly dissipates.

O daughter of the Sacred Name, open your ears, and with diligent heart hear the meaning of this allegorical message: What glorious praise there is for the towers of that well-established city, for they are love and harmony joined. And why do I use the term "tower"? Because the fountain that springs [cf. John 4.14] from the most high God flowed forth, encircling the whole earth, for God Himself so established all of creation in His absolute love that they lacked for nothing. Learn from this, therefore, that holy persons, in whom love dwells, lack for nothing, because their hearts are surrounded with gentleness and peace, as by the flowing aroma of balsam. It is for this reason that the ancient serpent is not able to destroy them, because just as a noisome stench is dispersed by the scent



of balsam, so does the devil flee from love and hide away in a cave. But wherever holy persons, in whom love does not dwell, are gathered together in the name of the Lord, they are like a city that has no tower or like beautiful houses that have no loftiness. Therefore, in this disorder they are despoiled of the money of justice and of the Rule, because they do not have well-built houses and so, frequently, they are destroyed, because just as a tower both adorns and sustains a city, so love adorns and sustains all the virtues. The knights of Love—Obedience, Faith, and Hope—are stationed in the tower. Obedience is girt with a shield, because it is always subordinate. Faith is clad in a breastplate, because it approves all good things which are in God, but which it has never seen with its eyes. And, through Faith, Hope embraces heaven with all its adornments. For Faith always looks to God through Obedience, and thus carries out what has been commanded.

Indeed, "God is love" [I John 4.8], because all His work is holy. But in humility He came down from heaven in order to free His prisoners who abandoned love when they did not know Him. He did this through His humanity, and thereby set an example for us. How? When we have given up our own will in performing the duties of this world, we follow His footsteps. And when we are gathered together in His name, just as all other birds gather to the eagle, we imitate Abraham, who left his people and his native country [cf. Gen 12.1ff], and, in accordance with God's command, performed the circumcision [cf. Gen 17.23–24], which was foreign to him. And when we are obedient to God's commands, through the Man who is like to us, we are multiplied in blessings like the stars of heaven, just as God promised Abraham through His angel [cf. Gen 22.15ff], for we too are searching for something foreign to us according to His incarnation, and thus we regard ourselves as nothing, and labor in the spiritual life. When we do this, we fortify our tower on all sides with stalwart knights through humility. And we too are stalwart knights when we overcome the desires of this world, subdue the madness of wrath, endure our poverty for the sake of Christ's love, reject the murderous thoughts of envy and hate, spurn not other sinners like ourselves or judge them unjustly, and do not seek false testimony against the upright and innocent.

These stalwart knights are those who guard our city on all sides, so that the wall of the holy Rule and our calling will not be breached by our enemies, that is, by hateful, spiteful morals, nor the door of peace repudiated by contradiction, for if that happens, the bolts of our door will be opened, and our enemies will come unhindered into our city. Let us not join with those who say in their ever-erring heart: We reject that which man's reason chooses and imposes upon us, because the things we choose and set for ourselves are more useful and just. Those treacherous people are the ones who destroy our city through their treachery, because they repudiate those things which have been passed down to us from our ancient, holy, and learned doctors concerning fasting, vigils, prayer, and other virtuous activities. But they choose, instead, their own will in place of the God Who created them.

Listen, O holy daughter: No stalwart knights are protecting your tower, and the guardians of your city are asleep. And so they have been led into the desert, through their own will. Thus your tower and city are so arid that they can scarcely stand. So rise up from your sleep, because the cables of your ship (that is, the

custom of your holy calling) have not yet been broken. Yet in the great foolishness of your character, you enjoy gossip and seek it out. This does you no good at all. For just as in deserted homes there are mice—big ones, small ones, blind ones—that gnaw up men's clothing, so also every holy custom is destroyed by such attitudes. The larger mice are disquieted minds of impiety, the small mice represent stupidity which, being nocturnal in nature, turns from the way of truth, and the blind mice stand for the vanity of this world which is blind to the light of justice. And so it is written in the Gospel: "Every kingdom divided against itself, shall be brought to desolation" [Luke 11.17]. Consider what great ardor of the Holy Spirit you are planted in, for He is not willing for you to fail in serving Him. Regard first the Rule of St. Benedict and other great masters with diligent heart, so that you will not perish but will live forever.

As for you, all you superiors, take care not to be like foolish farmers who take great delight in seeing the plow moving properly by itself, but when it goes off the path, do not take the trouble to turn it back to the right way. And take care lest the mighty Father of the household say to you: You are useless to me because you are bad stewards [cf. Luke 16.1ff]. Rather, consider carefully the needs of your subordinates and their adversities. Then protect them with all proper concern.

## 161

### Hildegard to the Abbess Hazzecha

Before 1160(?)  
or 1171–73(?)

In her usual manner, Hildegard exhorts the abbess to remain in her present office. She also demurs from answering questions about persons that the abbess had apparently inquired about.

My dearest daughter, I do not see that it is profitable for you and those two close friends of yours to seek out a hermitage in the forest, or even the shrines of saints, since you have been sealed with the seal of Christ, by which you make your way to the heavenly Jerusalem [cf. Heb 12.22].<sup>1</sup> For if you undertake greater toil than you can endure, you will fall, as I foretold, deceived by the devil.

Also, in the love of Christ I tell you that I do not usually speak about the end of life of individuals, nor of their works, nor of the things that lie in store for them, but, rather, although I am untaught, I speak and write only those things I am shown by the Holy Spirit in the vision of my spirit.

In my prayers I will gladly commend to God's grace those you have commended to me. I will also willingly pray God to free you from all that does not avail you, and to protect you from all future troubles. I will also pray that you

will so perfectly complete the labors of holy works with pious discernment that, strengthened by the splendor of unsullied holiness and enkindled by the ardor of God's true love, you will achieve the perfect bliss in which you will live forever.

*Note*

1. On stability versus pilgrimage, see Letter 92, n. 1.

## 162

# Hildegard to the Congregation of Nuns

1161–70

A long allegorical exhortation for the nuns to cultivate obedience and denial of the world, and return to the pristine purity of their community.

The first plant, which flourished in the first root of Jesse [cf. Is 11.1ff], says to this assembly: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard" [Luke 13.6]. And just as a blessing multiplied the blessings of a noble seed, so God with great zeal and with His blessing planted a spiritual seed in the vineyard of Sabaoth [cf. Rom 9.29]. And that plant was pleasant and delectable through the beginning of sanctity, and it grew in good reputation like the leaf of the fig tree. But good reputation without fruit will not be profitable unless it appears sweet as an apple in the taste of obedience. A fig tree must be cultivated with great care, lest it wither, for its fruit is bitter at first, but, later, becomes sweet.

So it is with the spiritual life: it must be cultivated with great care, lest the winter of tedium cause it to wither in a person's mind. In the beginning the labor is bitter, because it prohibits the desire of the flesh, the individuality of the will, and other such matters, but contempt for the world is very pleasant and sweet when the spirit, sanctified, envelops itself in sanctity. Still, care must be taken, lest it wither.

Now, that man who had the tree also had a fountain from which many streams flowed. But some horribly black and evil beasts came and tried to keep that fountain from flowing. Some of them picked up weeds with their mouths, and others reeds, and still others took up bellows, and they fanned a fire against the fountain.

O assembly, the Ancient Man brought you forth, a fountain, from which flow streams of sanctity. But terrible beasts of spiritual vices, horrible in their perversity and exceedingly black because they shun the brightness of innocence, come in their malevolence, seeking to influence you so that sanctity will not come forth from you. And some of them pick up weeds of filthy morals in the mouth of their

endeavor, and others reeds of vain weariness of good works, and still others take up bellows to puff up arrogance. And they all fan a fire against you, as their minds swell up with great iniquity, so that they regard life in God as punishment. These are the horrible beasts, O daughters of Jerusalem [cf. Cant 1.4], that are seeking to dry you up, and cause you to despair of life.

But the Ancient Man, who planted the fig tree, regards the fruit of His tree in its various works, and He holds the rod in His hand. For through the merits of sanctified spirits that frequently embraced God, He wishes to remove vice from you, and hold you in His hand. But when those precepts of the holy Rule and obedience and good custom established by the saints of old dry up in you, that Man says to the cultivator of the vineyard (that is, to the precepts of discipline), "Behold, for these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none" [Luke 13.7] in this tree when I look for the works of love and obedience and perseverance. For it merely gives forth the sound of fame, but does not eat the food of the life of perfection. And it does not bring forth apple blossoms of virtues, nor green leaves of holy works, nor works perfect in the chaste chastisement of the body. And He says with the rod of His correction: "Cut it down therefore: why cumbereth it the ground?" [Luke 13.7], as He chastises it with His scourge. For your convent was sanctified when it was first established, but, later, it became an exile, for it was unwilling to suckle its mother's breasts in sanctity and election. Therefore, it is strangled by tribulations and afflictions.

Yet it will not be cut down. For God remembers that He greatly loved it when it was first planted, and that within it He built up holy works within holy spirits. Therefore, in the admonition of the Holy Spirit, He will not abandon it, since the precepts of discipline say: "Lord, let it alone this year also, until I dig about it, and dung it" [Luke 13.8]. For God has regard for the blood of His Son, as it is written, "Ask of me, and I will give thee the Gentiles for thy inheritance" [Ps 2.8], because I was well pleased with you [cf. Matt 3.17]. And thus He is gathering this assembly in its tribulation and affliction and poverty to Himself, as it is written: O Jerusalem, "return to the Lord thy God" [Hosea 14.2], and again, "Arise and stand on high" [Baruch 5.5], and "behold the joy that will come to you from your God" [Baruch 4.36], and be adorned with virtues, because God seeks a sacrifice of praise from you [cf. Ps 49.14, 23], and wishes to keep you as He saw you when you were first planted. The gifts of the Holy Spirit will not desert you, and you will remain in your sanctification.

*Mainz(?)*

169

## A Community of Brothers to Hildegard

1163

The brothers have heard that Hildegard has written against the heresy of the Cathars, and they write to request a copy of her treatise.

To the dear lady and most holy mother, Hildegard, servant of Christ and mistress of the sisters in the monastery of the blessed Rupert in Bingen, from the whole community of the brothers of St. N., with a prayer that she be granted to walk with consent in the house of God [cf. Ps 54.15], and be pleasing to the Bridegroom of virgins in this valley of tears [cf. Ps 83.17].

Because it is proper that we look to God's will in matters that concern us, we flee to the refuge of your compassion, pious lady. For God has regarded you and has marvellously endowed you with a divine gift—a gift unheard of in our time—and, in accordance with God's bidding, you employ that gift not for yourself alone, but for the benefit of many others. Indeed, having seen and heard the miracles that the Lord works through you, we offer to God our resounding praise, unworthy as it is. But because we frequently neglect God, we are crushed by numerous tribulations, afflicted by countless disasters, and subjected to anxieties without number. And so lest despairing, we perish, it is proper—as it is necessary—for us to flee to those who devoutly love God, and who, with Mary, have chosen the best part [cf. Luke 10.42], so that we may seek their counsel and help. We have heard from truthful persons that you have written against the heresy of the Cathars, just as you learned to do through a vision of the secrets of God. We devoutly ask that you send this writing to us, for we have greater faith in revelations and responses from God than from man. And so we commend ourselves to your saintly prayers, asking you to kindly send to us whatever your Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus, deigns to reveal to you concerning these matters.

Farewell.

## 169r

## Hildegard on the Cathars

1163

This is Hildegard's treatise against the Cathars,<sup>1</sup> in which she cites liberally from the apocalyptic biblical books of Daniel, Isaiah, and Apocalypse.

In the month of July of the present year, which is one thousand one hundred and sixty-three from the Incarnation of our Lord, I looked from afar and, in the shadow of a true vision, I gazed under the altar [cf. Apoc 6.9] which is before the eyes of God [cf. Apoc 9.13], and I gazed also under the throne of God.

And I saw that the twenty-four elders, who sit around the throne [cf. Apoc 4.4ff], moved the glass sea, which is before the throne [cf. Apoc 4.6], and they said: Let us move the vain foundations of mockery laid down by those who seek to substitute their injustice for justice; and let us move the sparks of burning injustice kindled by those who say that they govern the people, but do not really govern them; and let us move the weeds of various squalid morals and the gilt cords of illusions and the schisms of schisms.

For the ancient lion roars, longing to fly into the midst of the aforesaid sparks of burning injustice. But the time has not come for this. Let us call upon the Ancient One, in Whom all species of growing things and all creatures are enumerated; and let us look upon the sword that appeared in the mouth of the speaker [cf. Apoc 1.16; 19.15]; and let us consider the cost of two pounds of wheat and barley [cf. Apoc 6.6]; and let us contemplate the trumpet that sounds before the first woe; and through the oath of those and through the power of the One Who sits on the throne [cf. Apoc 7.10; 21.5], let us bind the neck of the ancient lion, and restrain him with the bridle, lest before the time of times and the half time [cf. Apoc 12.14], and before the forty months, he send the sea forth after the woman fleeing in the desert [cf. Apoc 12.6].

For it has now been twenty-three years and four months since the four winds brought about great ruin through the permission of the four angels at the corners of the earth, and this came about because of the perverse works of mankind, which are blown forth from the mouth of the black beast. For their own works rose up over them so that the instability of filthy morals was blown forth in the East, and in the West blasphemy and forgetfulness of God came upon His saints through the ill-repute of the calf and through the worship of idols which perverts the holy sacrifice [cf. Ex 32.4ff], and in the South the filth of hateful vices, and in the North widened phylacteries of vestments [cf. Matt 23.5] in accordance with the will of the coiled serpent, and these are contaminated by the sudden arrival of all the aforementioned evils.

Yet it has been sixty years and twenty-four months since the ancient serpent began to delude the people with the phylacteries of vestments. Now, however, the innumerable saints of God, who are under the altar, lift up their voices,

crying out that the sprinkling of their corporal ashes is violated by the iniquity of the people [cf. Apoc 6.9f]. Thus from the sound of these saints, a wind is beginning to blow, which is now working miracles. Still, the one who sits upon the black horse [cf. Apoc 6.5] is sending forth the noise of a contrary wind to dissipate those miracles. But it will not prevail.

And, again, the ancient dragon roars in anger against the saints of God, and lifting himself up on the wings of the winds [cf. Ps 103.3], says: What is this? I will destroy what these, and those like them, have established. And they answer him: "Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and weighed the heavens with his palm? Who hath poised with three fingers the bulk of the earth, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance" [Is 40.12]? For we have weighed by God's scales, by Whom we do all things through the fiery spark that blazes before His face. You, however, have eyes that flash forth a destructive fire, and you will send forth a flame almost to the place where you were first established, and you will do this against God and against the heavens and against all those who are in heaven. But you will not be able to accomplish that. For when God has weighed the heavens in his palm, then a burning mountain will fall upon your neck, and all your strength will be utterly destroyed. But at that time a new canticle [cf. Ps 39.4] will be given to us from the throne, and to us also will be given eyes that look around on all sides, seeing and understanding all things. You, however, no longer have the time for devouring with your voracious throat. Therefore, in the name of God's throne and all His garments, give up this madness!

But, O you people, hear the Spirit of God saying to you: Within your midst, the ancient serpent is building towers in their ears, that is, those who are like the Sadducees and like those who call Baal God, and do not know the just God, so that by the cunning of a deceitful spirit, he sometimes appears to them like a spark, either black or stormy, or bright and local, and which soon vanishes. And this is a diabolical and deceptive thing, for deceptive spirits sometimes disguise themselves as the four elements and all their powers, because they conquered the first man. This, however, is by the permission of God, the source of wisdom and prophecy, but the revelation of matters that do not pertain to man remain hidden, because God is incomprehensible.

These men in whose ears the devil is building towers are like a crab, which moves forward and backward, and they are like scorpions, which furtively sting you with fiery tails and kill you with the terrible poison of cruel unbelief. These men the devil at times inspires with seemingly divine precepts, which they themselves seek by their own will, since they are, after all, the image of God. And the devil does this so that he may the more easily deceive them.

They are also like those large birds that cast aside their own eggs. And they say: Let us get rid of this, because it is poisonous. These are the people who deny first principles, that is, that God created all things, and commanded them to wax and multiply. These are the people who deny the sovereign principle, that is, that it was clear even before the ancient days that the Word of God was bound to become man. These people should be considered worse than the Jews, who

are too blind to see the fiery form that now shines as man in holy divinity. After a long time, these Jews will think that they have seen the just one, until God strikes the one that they believe in with a fiery scourge.

These Cathars are also fiery, sulfurous mountains, along with that evil beast who will open his mouth against God, and against heaven, and against all those who are in heaven [cf. Apoc 13.6]. And they are the very bowels of that unnatural beast, which coughs up and spits out the most disgusting impurity. And just as the prophets preceded the Lord and prophesied the way of salvation, demonstrating that He was filled with all the virtues of justice, so too do these precede the beast, embracing the filth and wickedness of all evils, going the way of the errant. For these prophets were inspired and taught by the finger of God, just as the devil fills these people with blasphemy, wickedness, and the falseness of all evil. For in the beginning of his ruin, the ancient serpent lost the key that he thought he had, but now he thinks in himself that this wicked beast is his key, and that he will be able to fulfill all his will through him. But in that beast, all his strength will be utterly destroyed.

Now, you, O people who hold the purest faith, looking to God, hear the voice of the one “who was and who is and who is about to come” [Apoc 1.4]: Hear the words of the priests who hold and preserve My justice. For these My words will sound in their ears, and they will speak these words to you in My name. Then with clamoring voices cast this impure and profane people out of your midst, and torment them with harsh and cruel words. Send them into exile, and put them to flight into the unhappy caverns and caves, for they want to seduce you. And do this immediately, lest you be cursed by God and peace flee from you. For you cannot be called teachers, and priests, kings, leaders, and princes of the people before God while you allow these people to live among you, for your cities and villas will be destroyed, and your estates will be plundered while these wicked people remain among you.

Now, praise be to God, Who sits on the throne and looks into the abyss [cf. Dan 3.55], and Who governs all of heaven. And the Spirit of God says: Whoever will neglect to hear and understand these words, and refuses to believe them—this one the sword of God’s word [cf. Eph 6.17] will strike with great tribulation.

And soon in that same vision, I heard a resounding voice saying to me: Write these things which you have seen and heard, and send them quickly to those priests of the Church [cf. Apoc 1.11] who worship God with the purest faith, so that they may preach them everywhere to the people in their parish, and thus protect them from these devilish treacheries, lest those evil people put down roots among them, and they perish.

I, a poor little form of a woman, languished for many days oppressed by sickness so that I could scarcely walk until I had committed these things to writing.

#### Note

1. On the Cathars, see Introduction, Vol. 1, pp. 11–14. See also Letter 15r.



## 170

## Certain Priests to Hildegard

Before 1153

The priests ask for a letter of general admonition and advice because they feel that they fall short in their duty and their lives.

To Hildegard, venerable and beloved lady and mother of the monastery of the blessed Rupert, the priests (alas, in name only) N., A., H., and E., along with other brothers of their community under the protection of St. Martin, with a devout prayer that she receive the blessing of both saints.

O elect and beloved servant of sanctity and dearest mother of many who follow sanctity, because we have heard many things about you that bring the "odour of life" [II Cor 2.16] to many people, we flee to your protection, seeking with thirsty hearts those things which are of God. For we were consecrated to the service of God from childhood so that we might faithfully serve our Creator in the holy orders of divine office. Yet although we have achieved the priesthood, and therefore ought to live worthily and irreproachably, we nevertheless frequently neglect the things that are of the spirit and do the things that are of the flesh [cf. Rom 8.5]. For although we ought to be the eye of contemplation, the ear of obedience, the nose of discernment, the mouth of truth, the hand of just work, the foot of the way of righteousness, and an example of virtue for God's people, we are more the "odour of death" [II Cor 2.16] and a stumbling block than a true rock of solidity. Therefore, we are guilty of many evils, for we have, so to speak, fallen from the sanctuary of the Lord to the filth of the slime.

Now, you, O pious mother, knowledgeable of the secrets of God, hear us earnestly and humbly beseeching you to offer us words of divine admonition, and to correct and advise us, because, although we have a modest knowledge of Scripture, we greatly desire to hear you who have received true and marvellous knowledge from the great Teacher Himself, and not from man. Now, may God pour into you that which you can then pour out to us who thirst.

Farewell.

170r

## Hildegard to the Priests

Before 1153

A letter of general admonition and advice to the priests with a special emphasis on chastity.

The voice of living wings [cf. Ezech 3.13; Apoc 9.9] says: O you who support the stones, and gird the members of diverse people, hear what I say to you: Run through the level streets to perform the sacrifices prescribed by the law. And gird your loins and restrain your limbs, as this figure shows through the mystical gift of God: "Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O thou most mighty" [Ps 44.4]. For divinity looked upon the simple character of a humble girl, and rested there in sweetest chastity, which was not touched by earthly viridity, but by supernal heat in its secret.<sup>a</sup> Then, True Man arose as if from dry earth, which the plow did not break. And the fruit of this earth was not inseminated, but produced a flower from the heat of the sun. Therefore, this Most Powerful One was girded with a sword, that is, with pure and piercing true justice, for the heat of the flesh and sin were not in Him. But as the son is from the father, the noble from the noble, the king from the king, and each from its own kind, so priests were established by Me, just as the father bequeaths his substance to his son, as it is written: "Israel is my inheritance" [Is 19.25], because it is imparted to the highest priesthood by mercy and grace and truth.

This testament is transmitted from Me to you, just "as a man of war" [Is 42.13] who has a large army passes it on to his son. So let priests imitate their Father and Lord, and just as He walked, let them walk in restraint of their bodies. Yet if a priest commits sin in the putridity of the flesh or in the wantonness of pride and lasciviousness, let him rise up, seek out a physician, and vomit up that sin as if it were poison, certainly not hold onto it longer, as if it were his close friend.

Therefore, hear: A lord had two regions: one, humid; the other, dry. In the humid region, all sorts of business transactions were being carried on, as in Tarsus, Tyre, Macedonia, and Ethiopia. In Tarsus, understand those who were running quickly and growing in everything, but still struggling with difficulty; in Tyre, those laboring in straitened circumstances and sometimes suffering want in their great need; in Macedonia, those burning in dryness, like the fruit that at one time flourishes, at another fades, or like a wolf, which at times devours, at times desists, at times carries off, at times kills; in Ethiopia, those feasting furtively and rejoicing in venomous tyranny and burning in shamelessness. In the arid region, on the other hand, there were opulent men, who had the beauty of herbs and flowers not planted by human hand. These remained in quiet contemplation of their Lord, where there was the sweetest odor and the most delightful sound, just as was prefigured in Abel, who was the first to act properly

[cf. Gen 4.4], and in Abraham, who revealed obedience [cf. Gen 22.9ff], and in Moses, who gave instruction to souls by establishing the precepts of sacrifice [cf. Ex 29], and in the Son of God, Who fulfilled all good things. This parable denotes the world, which grows among secular people because they bring forth children, but which decreases among spiritual people because they do not sow their seed. But God established chief teachers over the common people for the instruction of their souls. And also the Son of God came as the supernal teacher, as it is written: Behold the Lord will appear on a white cloud [cf. Apoc 14.14], "and with him thousands of saints" [Deut 33.2], "and he hath on his garment, and on his thigh written: King of kings, and Lord of lords" [Apoc 19.16]. For the Son of God appeared in the innocence of a simple girl as in a cloud, "and he hath set His tabernacle in the sun" [Ps 18.6] when He marvellously illuminated the mind of that Virgin, when she said: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word" [Luke 1.38]. And there arose in her a great column towering over all those who are born after the flesh when the Son of God came forth "as a bridegroom out of his bride chamber" [Ps 18.6], born of that sweetest Virgin, as if in a delightful dream and in the sweetest desire, as a bridegroom sweetly joins his spouse to himself in his mind. Therefore, many admirable virtues appeared with Him, far exceeding in good works the institutes of the Old Law. And so on His vestment and on His thigh was written: "King of kings, and Lord of lords," for His flesh sweetly sweated forth from the Virgin, and not from the thigh of a man.<sup>b</sup> Therefore, He rose up over all creatures, like a king who rules men, because sin did not bring Him forth, but the mighty power of divine might that foreknew all creatures before they came forth in the world. Thus He administered all the institutes of the law to His members, like a good steward who shows the people subject to him what is necessary for them, and what is not, as it is written: "Thou shalt rule them with a rod of iron, and shalt break them in pieces like a potter's vessel" [Ps 2.9]. For in the strongest might of divinity, the Living Fountain sprang forth, Who, through Himself, shows the purest and most constant precepts of the law, thus commanding justice to the righteous with an iron rod, both breaking and establishing all things according to what was just, as a potter breaks one vessel and makes another.

Now, hear, O you who would emulate Me [cf. I Cor 4.16; Phil 3.17]: From the beginning of the world, My people had predecessors and teachers. Why, therefore, do you display indignation and audaciousness and instability of character in your garrulous pride, as if you could create new heavens or a lofty mountain of ivory? For the wind easily disperses these things, and men trample them underfoot. In this way, you bear away in your souls the ten pounds and that penny which is the payment of the heavenly kingdom among righteous men [cf. Luke 19.12ff; Matt 20.1ff].

Rather, "Embrace discipline" [Ps 2.12], that is to say, the precepts established by the Law for your members, and be as pure in your thoughts, your words, and your works as the burnt sacrifice offered up by a priest, avoiding venomous words in the vanity of this world, because transgression of the Law is not expedient to

you. But bear the light of faith in your hands so that all the people will run to you. These are the precepts of the Law, like a great mountain upon which a light cannot be hidden. And embrace discipline in the girding of your loins, shining as a good example to other people, for you hold the rod of governance over them.

Also, "take heed" [Josh 23.6], "lest at any time the Lord be angry, and you perish from the just way" [Ps 2.12], for you ought to walk according to the example of the Son of God on the path of good works. For these attributes of your office were anciently prefigured in the sacrifice of calves and lambs. In the Old Testament, the priests were not restrained in their loins, because no one girded in his loins had preceded them. Now, however, the "sun of justice" [Mal 4.2] has shone forth. Therefore, walk in that sun and preserve your chastity, for neither a calf nor a goat nor a lamb was hanged on the wood of the cross for you, but the great and good Shepherd was given to the Passion of the cross for you. Imitate Him in your works.

Against injustice, however, "be ye angry, and sin not" [Ps 4.5], that is, do not have hatred, or envy, or harshness in the derision of your heart when you see people fall on account of the foolishness of their way of life, but anoint them with compassion, and correct them with gentleness [cf. Ps 140.5]. And do not be puffed up in your own self-esteem as if you are holy on account of the tonsure of your flesh so that you say in your hearts: The Lord chose us in sanctity, and nobody can exceed us in virtue. And why do you scorn the bright face of those who have embraced My garment through circumcision of their minds [cf. Rom 2.29], those who according to my ordination imitate the angels (who are the mirror of My face), and in contempt of the temporal world follow them. For an angel announced salvation to all people [cf. Luke 1.26ff]. And also in Abraham and in Jacob and in the rod of Aaron, angels announced salvation to the people beforehand [cf. Gen 22.15ff; 32.1ff; Num 17.2ff]. Why, therefore, should not these imitators of angels and of My garment not be able to, or even be obliged to, foresee the salvation of the people "for the present necessity" [I Cor 7.26] of those in need?

Therefore, enlist in the army of sanctity and "be sorry upon your beds" [Ps 4.5], so that humility may build a tower in you, a tower with windows of the virtues of good works, and with vaults of holy medicine, to each according to his measure [cf. Eph 4.7]. And let them see your interior mysteries, which are your good works. Therefore, be solicitous to see to it that your sanctity is gold, and not lead, because Jacob was upright in the height of felicity, but Esau was straitened and laid low in his conceit. Likewise, your mind is moved in the two parts of the spiritual life. Now, therefore, be vigorous and strengthen yourselves in all good things so that you do not fail.